



House of Commons
Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs Committee

**Conduct of the GM
Public Debate**

**Eighteenth Report of Session
2002–03**

*Report, together with minutes of proceedings,
oral and written evidence*

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Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its associated bodies.

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Summary

The GM public debate was an imaginative and innovative attempt to inform and at the same time consult with the public over a controversial and complex matter. It aimed to encourage public participation in policy-making. Whilst it was modestly successful in some areas, and despite the hard work of many, especially on the debate's Steering Board, overall the debate was an opportunity missed.

A debate is distinguished from an opinion poll because it sets out to educate and inform as well as to sample views. The GM public debate did not do so, in part because the information which was meant to underpin it – the Strategy Unit's economic review, the GM Science Review Panel report, and the outcome of the farm-scale evaluations – was not released until late in the process or afterwards. The debate also did not engage people beyond a self-selecting group which already held views about GM. Thus the wider public was in the main not informed by the debate, and nor were their opinions canvassed.

The principal blame lies with two decisions made by the Government. It did not allocate sufficient resources to the debate, and it set an absurdly tight deadline for its conclusion. This affected the conduct of the debate, particularly the publicity it was able to obtain and what information was available to it. We ask in this report for the Government to explain those decisions.

We also ask what lessons the Government has learnt from the GM public debate. Other public debates and consultations are planned: they need to be more successful.

1 Introduction

The history of the public debate

1. The genesis of *GM Nation?*, the public debate about genetically modified (GM) crops that was conducted in the Summer of 2003, can be found in *Crops on Trial*, a report published in September 2001 by the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC). The report assessed the conduct of the farm-scale evaluations of certain GM crops.¹ In it the AEBC said that

“We believe that robust public policies and regulatory frameworks for GM crops need to expose, respect and embrace the differences of view which exist, rather than bury them. The appropriate development of GM technology has suffered as a result of the lack of opportunity for serious debate about the full range of potential implications of GM agriculture ... We believe that the Government must now encourage comprehensive public discussion of the ecological and ethical – including socio-economic – issues which have arisen. Time is needed for people to overcome differences of language and explore the extent of their shared understandings, and above all there is a need to include those who have felt themselves to be excluded and hence to have no control over events”.²

2. In its January 2002 response the Government endorsed the concept of a public debate, and said that it would welcome further advice from the AEBC about how and when to hold such a debate about the possible commercialisation of the GM crops involved in the farm-scale evaluations.³ That advice followed in April 2002.⁴ In July 2002 the Government announced that a steering board, chaired by Professor Malcolm Grant (also chair of the AEBC), would be set up to manage the debate at ‘arm’s length’ from Government.⁵ The Public Debate Steering Board (PDSB) then made the arrangements for the debate, which was held between 3 June and 18 July 2003. The report of the debate was published on 24 September.⁶ A full timetable of events leading up to, during and after the debate is set out below.

¹ AEBC (2001) *Crops on Trial*, which can be viewed at www.aebc.gov.uk

² *Crops on Trial*, paras 21 and 22

³ Defra (2002) *Government response to ‘Crops on Trial’*

⁴ AEBC (2002) *A debate about the issue of possible commercialisation of GM crops in the UK*

⁵ Defra press notice 309/02, *Public to choose issues for GM debate – Beckett*, 26 July 2002

⁶ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, which can be viewed at www.gmnation.org.uk

GM Public Debate: Timetable of events

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| 10 September 2001 | Publication by AEBC of Crops on Trial, which calls for a public debate |
| 17 January 2002 | Government response to Crops on Trial invites AEBC's advice by the end of April 2002 about the conduct of a debate |
| 26 April 2002 | AEBC offers its advice |
| 26 July 2002 | Government invites the chairman of the AEBC, to head an independent steering board (the PDSB) for the debate. Government also identifies three 'strands' to the debate: a public debate; a review of the scientific issues relating to GM; and a study by the Strategy Unit of the costs and benefits of GM crops. Government allocates £250,000 to the debate, and asks for a report about the debate by June 2003 |
| 13 September 2002 | Appointment of Central Office of Information (COI) to manage aspects of the debate on behalf of the PDSB |
| 5 December 2002 | PDSB writes to Government for first time about its budget and about its timetable, in light of forthcoming Scottish and Welsh elections. An exchange of correspondence ensues |
| 5 February 2003 | We write to Secretary of State about the budget and timetable |
| 14 February 2003 | Food Standards Agency launches a GM food debate |
| 18 February 2003 | Secretary of State writes to PDSB to say that the budget of the debate has increased to £500,000, and that the debate can now be held later, with the report of the debate being delivered by the end of September |
| 7 April 2003 | Food Standards Agency citizens' jury reports |
| 3 June 2003 | Public debate, GM Nation?, is launched |
| 11 July 2003 | Strategy Unit report into the costs and benefits of GM crops published ⁷ |
| 18 July 2003 | Public debate, GM Nation?, officially ends |
| 21 July 2003 | GM Science Review Panel publishes its first report ⁸ |
| 22 July 2003 | Food Standards Agency publishes its Focus Group Report ⁹ |
| 24 September 2003 | PDSB publishes report on findings of the public debate |
| 16 October 2003 | Results of farm-scale trials of GM crops published |

⁷ Strategy Unit (2003) *Field work: Weighing up the costs and benefits of GM crops*, 11 July 2003; this can be viewed on the internet at www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page3673.asp.

⁸ GM Science Review Panel (2003) *GM Science Review: First report*, 21 July 2003; this is at www.gmsciencedebate.org.uk.

⁹ Food Standards Agency (2003) *Public attitudes to GM*, 22 July 2003; this is at www.food.gov.uk/gmdebate.

Our inquiry

3. Our involvement began in Spring 2002, when we set up a Sub-committee to gather evidence about genetically modified organisms.¹⁰ The Sub-committee's report focussed on the proposed public debate. It welcomed the debate as "an innovative and sensible means of attempting to understand public feelings about such a complicated issue".¹¹ We felt sure that the debate – particularly if informed by the outcome of independently-conducted scientific research – would at the very least raise "the quality of public knowledge" and provide "a forum through which the public can air its views".

4. Our interest in large-scale public consultations such as this one began with our inquiry into the Government's proposed consultation process about radioactive waste.¹² Since publishing our first report into the GM public debate we have continued our interest, monitoring the preparations being made. In February 2003 we became aware of the concerns expressed by the PDSB about the timing of the debate and the resources devoted to it. We wrote to the Secretary of State at that stage to support calls for additional funds and for a delay in the commencement of the debate, calls to which she acceded.¹³

5. Once the debate was underway we decided that we would undertake a brief inquiry into its conduct. In July 2003 we invited written evidence about the conduct of the GM public debate, although we were at pains to make clear that we would not consider the *outcome* of the debate. We said that we would particularly consider the adequacy of arrangements made to support the debate, and the role played by Defra in financially supporting and publicising the debate.¹⁴ In October 2003 we took evidence from Professor Malcolm Grant, chair of the Public Debate Steering Board, and then from Elliot Morley MP, Minister for Environment and Agri-Environment, together with Mr Lucian Hudson, Director of Communications at Defra and also a member of the Steering Board. We are grateful to our oral witnesses as well as those who submitted written evidence to our inquiry.

6. We do not, in this report, describe how the debate was conducted. That is done by the report of the debate, and is discussed in much of the written evidence we have received. It is considered in detail in the memorandum submitted by the *Understanding Risk* team led by Professor Nick Pidgeon at the University of East Anglia.¹⁵ Professor Pidgeon's team was invited to act as independent evaluator of the debate by the PDSB, and we are grateful to them for helping us by submitting written evidence.

¹⁰ Press notice number 15 of Session 2001-02, 7 February 2002

¹¹ EFRA Committee (2002) *Genetically modified organisms*, HC (2001-02) 767, para.39; Government reply (2002) HC (2001-02) 1222

¹² EFRA Committee (2002) *Radioactive Waste: The Government's consultation process*, HC (2001-02) 407; Government reply (2002) HC (2001-02) 1221

¹³ The correspondence is on our website, reached via www.parliament.uk.

¹⁴ Press notice, 17 July 2003

¹⁵ Ev 50

2 Conduct of the debate

Successes

7. The initiation of a public debate has been described as “a highly innovative experiment in participatory democracy”.¹⁶ It is clear that “many people were keen to try this new form of participation”.¹⁷ As many as 600 public meetings were held, and the *GM Nation?* website was visited by nearly 25,000 people (there were 2.9 million hits in total).¹⁸ In all, around 37,000 feedback forms were returned during the debate. By any measure this was an impressive response. Professor Grant has been quoted as saying that the debate stimulated a “remarkable level of response”.¹⁹

8. It is easy to criticise the debate on the grounds that it engaged only those with already determined views. GeneWatch UK told us that “many of the people who participated were those who had already thought about GM foods and crops and formed opinions”.²⁰ In its evidence the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (abc) draws attention to analysis in the *GM Nation?* report of the feedback forms received, which says that 47 percent of feedback forms indicate ‘implacable opposition’ to GM, and 32 percent are from those ‘somewhat opposed’. Only 12 percent reflect ‘no fixed position’.²¹ The abc uses this data to claim that “only 12 percent of [the feedback forms] received could be considered to be from people with no fixed views on GM”.²² It also says that it estimates that 70 to 80 percent of attendees at public debate meetings were opposed to GM and “many were members of organised campaign groups”.²³

9. Professor Grant’s response was that he had no evidence that the proportion of participants in the debate who were members of campaigning organisations was as high as 70 percent.²⁴ Nevertheless, he pointed out that it would have been surprising if campaign groups had *not* attempted to influence the debate. He also told us that he would not dismiss opinions held by people who have thought about the issues, even if they “are now engaged in campaigning stances on either side”.²⁵ Indeed he argued that “these are important opinions to listen to”, and that many of those concerned had not felt like the Government had listened to them before.²⁶ He said that “people had appreciated being asked to be involved in a major, controversial area of public policy ... I would not

¹⁶ Ev 50, para.4

¹⁷ Ev 27, para.11

¹⁸ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, para.26

¹⁹ *Farmers Guardian*, 26 September 2003, p.2

²⁰ Ev 27, para.11

²¹ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, para.132

²² Ev 36

²³ Ev 36

²⁴ Q7

²⁵ Q2

²⁶ Q2

underestimate that as a positive outcome of the process”.²⁷ Professor Grant argued that the debate had been “a highly symbolic exercise in public trust in government”.²⁸

10. We will return below to the degree to which the debate engaged with the wider public. But it would be wrong to pretend that the debate did not have a positive side. **Underpinning the public debate was the laudable aim of engaging the public in policy-making about a controversial issue. Launching the public debate was imaginative and innovative. Many people did engage with the debate, and, even if the views of a large proportion were unshakable, giving them the opportunity to air their opinions in a formal setting was worthwhile. Any criticism that we make elsewhere in this report of the conduct of the debate must be seen in that context.**

Narrow-but-deep

11. One aspect of the debate was of particular interest. Alongside the open debate the PDSB commissioned group discussion exercises to try to examine attitudes to GM amongst those who had *not* taken a conscious decision to participate in the debate. Ten groups were established, their members chosen

- to exclude those either working in or campaigning for or against biotechnology and GM,
- to reflect a range of ages and socio-economic groupings, and
- broadly to represent the geographic areas of the country.²⁹

The groups met once to be introduced to the subject and the debate, and were then asked to think, research and talk about the subject before reconvening after two weeks. At the second session participants reported what they had discovered, and debated the issues considered most important.

12. The ‘narrow-but-deep’ process was generally viewed favourably. The abc told us that the narrow-but-deep groups “are the only methodologically sound results from the *GM Nation?* process”.³⁰ Another witness told us that the groups “provided some valuable evidence of the way in which the general population might approach GM”.³¹ Professor Grant claimed that it was an “enormously rich methodology”.³² **The work conducted in the ‘narrow-but-deep’ groups was valuable, and its outcomes very interesting. We commend the PDSB for commissioning the groups. Any criticism that we make of the debate in this report does not extend to the ‘narrow-but-deep’ work.**

²⁷ Q12

²⁸ Q39

²⁹ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, paras.141 ff

³⁰ Ev 36

³¹ Ev 59 para.3

³² Q58

Concerns

Timing

13. It was always intended that the public debate would be underpinned and informed by scientific and other information. *Crops on Trial* called for independent assessment of the science surrounding the cultivation of GM crops,³³ a recommendation subsequently endorsed and added to by us.³⁴ In May 2002 the Secretary of State commissioned a review of the available science, led by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Sir David King. She also announced an economic assessment of the costs and benefits of GM crops, undertaken by the Strategy Unit. Both pieces of work were intended to contribute to an “open and informed debate about all these issues”.³⁵

14. One of the principal sources of scientific evidence relevant to the public debate was the farm-scale evaluations (FSEs). From the outset the AEBC was concerned to ensure that the results of the FSEs were available *prior* to (or at least *during*) the debate. Thus it envisaged that the debate would “run on to Autumn/Winter 2003, after the first set of results from the FSEs is published (in Summer 2003)”. It said that “a programme of debate that did not encompass the FSE results and other relevant information could look as if it had been designed to end somewhat prematurely”.³⁶

15. The Government initially required that the PDSB report its findings in June 2003, although the date was later moved to September. As a result the debate formally ended on 18 July 2003. The Strategy Unit’s economic report was published seven days before the end of the debate; the GM Science Review Panel published its first report three days *after* the debate; and the results of the FSEs were reported in October. **It is not clear why the Government did not accede to the AEBC’s original timetable for the debate or why, once it became clear that the science and economics reviews and the FSE results would not be available to inform the debate, it did not set a later deadline for the PDSB’s report.**

Duration

16. The tightness of the deadline for completing the debate meant that it formally lasted for only six weeks. Professor Grant made plain the PDSB’s uneasiness about the duration of the debate, saying that it “had not wished for six weeks but we were working ... against an iron cast requirement from the Government that we should report by the end of September”.³⁷ Several of our witnesses complained that the debate was simply too short. For example, the National Consumer Council said that “this time period was woefully, and unnecessarily, inadequate to ensure the kind of local level engagement, really reaching ‘ordinary’ citizens that was originally intended”.³⁸ And Professor Grant’s assessment was

³³ *Crops on Trial*, para.43

³⁴ EFRA Committee (2002) *Genetically modified organisms*, HC (2001-02) 767, para.34

³⁵ Defra press notice 214/02, *Beckett announces a public debate on GM*, 31 May 2002

³⁶ Letter from the Chairman of the AEBC to the Secretary of State, 26 April 2002, para.43

³⁷ Q46

³⁸ Ev 43, para.8

stark: he told us that “six weeks was too short”.³⁹ In his evidence the Minister accepted that Government best practice for consultations on legislation and other matters is three months – that is, twice the duration of the public debate.⁴⁰

Budget

17. The Government agreed (in the end) to provide £500,000 as the budget for the public debate, and also to pay the management fee of the Central Office of Information. Professor Grant emphasised that the true cost of the exercise – taking into account the time and hard work of members of the PDSB and the monies expended by the Central Office of Information – probably ran to more than £1 million.⁴¹ The *GM Nation?* report says that £650,000 was spent on the public debate programme and on support costs.⁴²

18. That figure must be compared, first, with what was asked for by the PDSB. Originally the Government had granted a budget of £250,000. In due course the PDSB decided that such resources would not be adequate, and asked for additional money.⁴³ Professor Grant told us that at this stage the Central Office of Information had prepared a “menu of possibilities” which ranged from £0.5 million to £1.2 million.⁴⁴ In fact the Government eventually offered £500,000.

19. A second useful comparison is what has been spent in other countries. Professor Grant reported that in New Zealand a Royal Commission had considered the matter.⁴⁵ Its total costs had amounted to around £2 million.⁴⁶ A similar amount had been spent in the Netherlands. We note that the populations of each country are respectively one-sixteenth and one-quarter of that of the United Kingdom.

20. Professor Grant told us that the budget meant that the PDSB was “very severely constrained in what we could do. Our publicity budget was running on empty the whole time”.⁴⁷ He said baldly that the money allocated to the debate “was not satisfactory”,⁴⁸ and that, compared to other countries, “the UK has had a public debate for half a million. I have to say were you to ask me would I do it again I would say absolutely not. With those constraints I would not do it”.⁴⁹

³⁹ Q46

⁴⁰ Q85

⁴¹ Q17

⁴² *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, p.64

⁴³ Letter from the Chairman of the PDSB to the Secretary of State, 5 December 2002

⁴⁴ Q15

⁴⁵ For more information, see www.gmcommission.govt.nz

⁴⁶ Q15

⁴⁷ Q10

⁴⁸ Q17

⁴⁹ Q15

Consequences

21. The public debate was constrained in its timing, its duration and its budget. Our witnesses identified three significant consequences of those constraints.

The PDSB was obliged to appoint the Central Office of Information

22. Several of our witnesses were critical of the decision to appoint the Central Office of Information to manage aspects of the debate on behalf of the PDSB. The criticism was on two grounds. First, it was suggested that the COI was not up to the job:

- the Consumer Association told us that “information from COI was always vague and non-committal...We became increasingly alarmed that COI did not have the expertise to deal with such a wide-ranging exercise”;⁵⁰
- the National Trust asked whether the COI “was a suitable organisation to run the debate ... [it] had no previous experience with large-scale public engagement exercises”;⁵¹
- the Five Year Freeze campaign said that “although COI competently delivered certain elements of the debate ... there were other areas, particularly the design of the open deliberative element of the debate, where their lack of experience showed”;⁵² and
- GeneWatch referred to the “poor quality work of the COI”.⁵³

23. We are not in a position properly to judge the abilities of the COI, and so defer to the judgement of Professor Grant. He refuted some of the criticism levelled, saying that in fact the COI *did* have experience of managing large-scale events, and that it had a research capacity “that was tremendously useful to us”.⁵⁴ He also said that it faced a “very difficult task”, and had to travel “a very significant learning curve”.⁵⁵ Nevertheless he was clearly critical, telling us that PDSB members ended up “doing a lot of the detailed operational work rather than standing back and steering. What we wished to do was steer a highly professional delivery of the operation and we had to do, to my mind, too much detailed management”.⁵⁶

24. The second area of criticism centred on the perception of some that the COI was not sufficiently independent of Government to be involved in delivering the public debate. The Five Year Freeze, for example, said that the appointment of the COI was “controversial ... because of the acknowledged need to carry out the process at arm’s length from

⁵⁰ Ev 47, para.7

⁵¹ Ev 30, para.2(b)

⁵² Ev 44, para.7

⁵³ Ev 27, para.9

⁵⁴ Q25

⁵⁵ Q29, Q28

⁵⁶ Q29

Government”.⁵⁷ The AEBC at an early stage questioned the independence of the COI.⁵⁸ Although there seems to be little evidence that the COI did not in fact operate entirely properly,⁵⁹ concerns persist about its *perceived* independence from Government.

25. Professor Grant conceded that “the COI issue is a very difficult one”.⁶⁰ He told us although the PDSB had been aware of the criticisms to which it might be exposed by appointing the COI, it had little choice. At the time that the decision was made the PDSB was working to the June 2003 deadline. Professor Grant described work at that stage as “trying to get together a coherent debate against an impossible timescale”.⁶¹ Putting the work out to tender according to European Union rules would have been too time-consuming: the COI has a special status under the rules which meant that work could be commissioned without delay.⁶² He also cited the financial advantages of using the COI.⁶³ Professor Grant said that the fact that the PDSB had not been able to choose freely meant that there had been a “degree of coercion” in the appointment process.⁶⁴

26. In its evidence Defra accepted that the appointment of a prime contractor might have been handled differently. It told us that “had there been more time clearly it would have been better just to have an open tender with anyone coming forward as the prime contractor”.⁶⁵ **Whether or not the performance of the COI significantly affected the conduct of the debate, given the criticism surrounding its appointment it is unfortunate that the PDSB was not able at least to consider other contractors. The fact that it was not able to do so is the direct result of the constraints placed on the PDSB by Government – principally, in this case, the deadline set for completion of the debate. Those constraints meant that the PDSB was perhaps not able to appoint the best contractor, and the perceived independence of the debate was jeopardised.**

Not all information was available

27. As we have said, it was intended that the public debate was to be informed by the scientific and economic reviews, and by the outcome of the FSEs. In the event this “essential information” was not available, “due to the inadequate timeframe for the public debate”.⁶⁶ Several of our witnesses have commented that it was “unfortunate that neither the science review nor the economic review strands of the public debate were available during the formal part of the public debate”.⁶⁷ It has been argued that the public debate should have been extended “until after the publication of the FSEs, in the Autumn. This

⁵⁷ Ev 44, para.6

⁵⁸ Minutes of the AEBC board meeting, 11-12 September 2002, para.12

⁵⁹ See Q66

⁶⁰ Q25

⁶¹ Q28

⁶² Q25, Q29

⁶³ Q25

⁶⁴ Q28

⁶⁵ Q63

⁶⁶ Ev 45, para.15

⁶⁷ Ev 35, para.4.1

would [also] have allowed more time for public engagement with the information produced by the Strategy Unit and science review”.⁶⁸

28. The fact that the debate was not informed by the outcomes of the economic and scientific reviews, nor by the results of the FSEs, is highly regrettable. Without this information – some of which was commissioned specifically to inform the debate – the likelihood that the wider ‘public’ would be informed about GM as a result of the debate was much reduced. We recommend that the Government now explain why the deadline for the debate was such that the two reviews and the FSEs could not be used to inform the process, and why, once it became clear that the debate would end too soon, the Government did not ask the PDSB to extend it.

The wider public was not engaged

29. There is considerable evidence that the debate was able to engage with only a limited cross-section of the general population. The report of the debate itself says that the open part of the debate “reflects the views of people who are regularly engaged in politics and current affairs”.⁶⁹ The report describes this as a “self-selecting” group.⁷⁰ The *Understanding Risk* team told us that “two-thirds of respondents claimed to have a degree, compared to one-fifth of the [general] population, according to the 2001 Census”; thus “these events were often dominated by discussions characteristic of a knowledgeable and an experienced engagement in the GM issue”.⁷¹

30. Professor Grant conceded that the debate “fell short” in engaging the wider public in the process: he told us that he had hoped “that we would have been much more successful in formenting discussion and debate amongst other social groups”.⁷² He said that although the debate was “hugely attractive” to those already interested in GM, “much more would need to be done” to reach a wider constituency.⁷³ As we have discussed above, the problems were a lack of time and a shortage of money, which Professor Grant described as placing “constraints” on organising the debate. He told us that “in order to attract a much wider range of people in the discussion you need a much bigger publicity budget and also I think a much more developed methodology for engagement with those groups; more networking, more time, more opportunity”.⁷⁴ The Minister, however, questioned whether additional money spent on “publicity material would generate more involvement and participation”.⁷⁵

31. We agree with Professor Grant. Whether or not the ‘public’ in general would have become involved in the debate, the inevitable consequence of insufficient resources being available to publicise and promote it was that it did not engage the wider population. It would have been helpful if there had been an opportunity to employ a

⁶⁸ Ev 45, para.15

⁶⁹ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, para.140

⁷⁰ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, para.194

⁷¹ Ev 52-53, para.18

⁷² Q9

⁷³ Q9

⁷⁴ Q10

⁷⁵ Q90

range of techniques to encourage public participation. Moreover, time was an important factor: with more time a greater amount of work could have been done to reach out more widely. It is profoundly regrettable that the open part of the process, far from being a ‘public debate’, instead became a dialogue mainly restricted to people of a particular social and academic background. The greatest failure of the debate is that it did not engage with a wider array of people.

32. We have been given tantalising hints of what might have been achieved with more time and more money. Even with limited resources for publicity the debate was covered both in the news media and in episodes of the *Archers* and the *Moral Maze*. Professor Grant told us that given more time “we would have developed the relationship with the media that we needed to”.⁷⁶ We would have liked to have seen and heard many more informative or argumentative programmes on television and on radio. A primetime television debate, such as has been held in relation to the monarchy and hunting, would have been welcome.⁷⁷ **To engage with the wider public the debate needed to go into their living rooms, rather than be conducted in the village hall. With sufficient time and money to publicise and promote the debate, we have little doubt that it would have been possible to do so.**

3 Other issues

Making use of the information gathered

33. From the outset of the public debate there has been concern about what the Government would do with the information gathered:

- the Five Year Freeze said that “from the outset there was public scepticism that the Government would act on the outcomes of the debate ... members of the public felt the process was little more than a PR exercise”;⁷⁸
- GeneWatch reported that “all stakeholders shared the uncertainty about how the Government would use the findings of the debate”;⁷⁹
- the National Trust said that it was “concerned that it is still unclear how the views of the public will be fed into the decision-making process on GM ... The impression given is of consultation without inclusion”;⁸⁰ and
- the National Consumer Council told us that “the Government failed to make clear what influence the outcomes of the public debate would have on its decision-making process ... this still remains unclear”.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Q19

⁷⁷ As advocated, amongst others, by the abc; Ev 34, para.2.4

⁷⁸ Ev 46, para.20

⁷⁹ Ev 27, para.7

⁸⁰ Ev 31, para.2(e)

⁸¹ Ev 42, para.5

34. In a letter to the PDSB in November 2002 the Government set out its view of the role to be played by the public debate in decision-making about the application of GM technology in the United Kingdom. It said that

There are established criteria, enshrined in EU and UK legislation, which will provide a basis for the future decision-making process. The starting point is that decisions are based on the scientific evidence as to whether there is a risk to human health or the environment. It is, however, important that these decisions are taken in the context of a full understanding amongst the public of their implications. The debate could be invaluable in this respect as well as in informing the government's approach to decision-making, and our view of the overall framework in which decisions are taken. We will listen, and learn, from the views emerging from the debate.⁸²

In his evidence the Minister reiterated that view. He told us that the debate “was not meant to be a referendum on GM ... [but] we must take account of the findings of the debate, we cannot ignore the views of the people that were expressed”.⁸³ The Government is committed to responding to the debate in much the same way as it responds to a select committee report: that is, in public, and within around two months.⁸⁴

35. The *GM Nation?* report says that one of the factors by which the success of the public debate should be measured is “the extent to which the report from the debate could reasonably be said to have had an impact on Government. Was information about public views emerging from the debate taken into account in decision-making?”⁸⁵ Professor Grant told us that if the Government failed to reflect the findings of the debate in its decisions the whole exercise will have been a failure.⁸⁶ He said that the Government should “be able to demonstrate, as it has promised to do, how it has taken into account the findings from the debate”.⁸⁷

36. We particularly take note of the comments made by the National Consumer Council in its evidence. It told us that

Honesty about the limits for and potential for consumer/public influence are an essential element in any successful public engagement strategy. Without such clarity and understanding the public are more likely to display cynicism towards the process. If people believe the exercise to be tokenistic they will be deterred from taking part.⁸⁸

We endorse the view that it is critically important that the holding of the debate is seen to have an influence on the decisions subsequently made by Government. We recommend that in its response to the report of the public debate (and to this report) the Government set out exactly how it will take into account the outcomes of the debate

⁸² Letter from the Secretary of State to the Chairman of the PDSB, 7 November 2002

⁸³ Q61

⁸⁴ Q83; see also QQ80 ff

⁸⁵ *GM Nation?: The findings of the public debate*, p.56

⁸⁶ Q43

⁸⁷ Q44

⁸⁸ Ev 42, para.5

in its decision-making about GM technology. In particular it should set out precisely the legal framework under which decisions about GM will be taken.

The activities of the Food Standards Agency

37. In February 2003 the Food Standards Agency (FSA) launched what it described as a “distinctive and innovative range of initiatives to independently assess people's views on the acceptability of genetically modified food and how this relates to consumer choice”.⁸⁹ The FSA set up a ‘citizens’ jury’ to address the question *should GM foods be available to buy in the UK?*; it set up a website about genetically modified food;⁹⁰ published a booklet for consumers; and sponsored various events in schools and elsewhere with the aim of reaching out to young people and consumers on low incomes. The outcome of the citizens’ jury was announced in April 2003.⁹¹

38. The FSA says that its activities amount to “the Agency's contribution to the Government's public debate on GM”.⁹² However, the relationship between the public debate, the Science Review and the Strategy Unit study was the subject of a formal ‘statement of relationships’,⁹³ and it is far from clear how the FSA’s work was intended to mesh with the wider work being undertaken. Members of the PDSB quite reasonably felt that there was the “possibility of confusion created by a separate programme of publicly-funded debate”,⁹⁴ a point taken up by some of our witnesses.⁹⁵ **We would value an explanation from the Food Standards Agency of its decision to undertake a ‘public debate’ of its own about GM food, why it chose to do so at the time that it did, what was the cost to public funds of its initiative, and how its work relates to the other strands of the public debate. We would also be keen to learn of future plans for the Agency to study public opinion about GM food.**

4 Conclusions

39. Aspirations for the public debate were high. In its letter advising the Government about holding a public debate, the AEBC said that

The principal objective of stimulating a public debate ... is to assess the nature and spectrum of the public's views on the possible commercialisation of GM crops in the United Kingdom ... [But] an inevitable outcome of the debate will be a better-informed public because that is what happens in good debates. The relatively small proportion of people whom we would envisage taking part in regional events or in

⁸⁹ Food Standards Agency (2003) *FSA opens GM food debate with citizens' jury and initiatives to involve young people and low income consumers*, 15 February 2003, Press release 2003/0329

⁹⁰ www.food.gov.uk/gmdebate

⁹¹ Food Standards Agency (2003) *FSA citizens' jury says GM food should be available to buy in the UK*, 7 April 2003, reference R665-37

⁹² www.food.gov.uk/gmdebate

⁹³ Which can be viewed at www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk

⁹⁴ Minutes of the ninth meeting of the PDSB, 20 February 2003, para.25

⁹⁵ See Ev 28, para.13; Ev 43, para.10

focus groups as part of the programme of debate will gain quite a lot of knowledge. Our aspiration is that in addition, many people not participating in these events would also become more aware of the science and the wider issues around GM crops, gaining access to the information they want and need to debate the issues.⁹⁶

Similarly, in our earlier report we envisaged that “at the very least the debate will provide a platform through which the quality of public knowledge will be raised”.⁹⁷

40. In short the objectives of the debate were at least twofold: to “clarify” and to “advance” public views about GM.⁹⁸ In its independent evaluation of the debate the *Understanding Risk* team went further, identifying *four* objectives to which the public debate might have contributed. It said that the debate could have been an exercise in *communication*, intended to inform the public; in *consultation*, with a view to canvassing views; in *participation*, designed to engage the lay public in policy-making; or as an *experiment* in engagement, which would inform future such consultation exercises and debates.⁹⁹

41. The debate’s success in achieving these objectives was variable. It succeeded in consulting with a limited group of already well-informed people about their views, and it encouraged them to participate in policy-making. But it did not reach out beyond this limited stratum of the public. However, its greatest failure was in communication: no-one can seriously argue that as a result of the public debate ‘the public’ at large is any better informed about GM. **The public debate was an imaginative initiative, but nonetheless represents an opportunity missed. Although other reasons for its failure can be found, including, no doubt, a degree of public apathy, two principal problems resulted from Government decisions: the tight deadline set for completion of the process, which meant that relevant data (the reports from the Strategy Unit and the GM Science Review Panel, and the outcome of the FSEs) was not available, and the paltry resources allocated to the debate. The Government, in its response to our report, must allay the suspicion that, having agreed to undertake a public debate, it did as little as it could to make it work.**

42. We therefore come to the fourth objective of the debate identified by the *Understanding Risk* team: that it represented an experiment in participatory democracy from which much might be learnt. The Government is committed to other public debates and consultations – not least about the disposal of radioactive waste, a debate about which we have previously commented¹⁰⁰ – and we strongly hope that they will prove more successful than this one. As the National Consumer Council put it, “this isn’t just about GM, it is also about the way in which government handles matters of risk and uncertainty”.¹⁰¹ **We trust that the Government will look seriously at the lessons to be learned from the conduct of the GM public debate. As we have made clear in this report, the main lesson is that wide-ranging consultative exercises such as the GM public debate must be adequately resourced and must be given enough time to be conducted properly.**

⁹⁶ Letter from the Chairman of the AEBC to the Secretary of State, 26 April 2002

⁹⁷ EFRA Committee (2002) *Genetically modified organisms*, HC (2001-02) 767, para.39

⁹⁸ Letter from the Chairman of the AEBC to the Secretary of State, 26 April 2002, para.5

⁹⁹ Ev 51, para.10

¹⁰⁰ EFRA Committee (2002), *Radioactive Waste: The Government's consultation process*, HC (2001-02) 407

¹⁰¹ Ev 43, para.11

Conclusions and recommendations

Successes

1. Underpinning the public debate was the laudable aim of engaging the public in policy-making about a controversial issue. Launching the public debate was imaginative and innovative. Many people did engage with the debate, and, even if the views of a large proportion were unshakable, giving them the opportunity to air their opinions in a formal setting was worthwhile. Any criticism that we make elsewhere in this report of the conduct of the debate must be seen in that context. (Paragraph 10)
2. The work conducted in the ‘narrow-but-deep’ groups was valuable, and its outcomes very interesting. We commend the PDSB for commissioning the groups. Any criticism that we make of the debate in this report does not extend to the ‘narrow-but-deep’ work. (Paragraph 12)

Failings

3. It is not clear why the Government did not accede to the AEBC’s original timetable for the debate or why, once it became clear that the science and economics reviews and the FSE results would not be available to inform the debate, it did not set a later deadline for the PDSB’s report. (Paragraph 15)
4. Whether or not the performance of the COI significantly affected the conduct of the debate, given the criticism surrounding its appointment it is unfortunate that the PDSB was not able at least to consider other contractors. The fact that it was not able to do so is the direct result of the constraints placed on the PDSB by Government – principally, in this case, the deadline set for completion of the debate. Those constraints meant that the PDSB was perhaps not able to appoint the best contractor, and the perceived independence of the debate was jeopardised. (Paragraph 26)
5. The fact that the debate was not informed by the outcomes of the economic and scientific reviews, nor by the results of the FSEs, is highly regrettable. Without this information – some of which was commissioned specifically to inform the debate – the likelihood that the wider ‘public’ would be informed about GM as a result of the debate was much reduced. We recommend that the Government now explain why the deadline for the debate was such that the two reviews and the FSEs could not be used to inform the process, and why, once it became clear that the debate would end too soon, the Government did not ask the PDSB to extend it. (Paragraph 28)
6. Whether or not the ‘public’ in general would have become involved in the debate, the inevitable consequence of insufficient resources being available to publicise and promote it was that it did not engage the wider population. It would have been helpful if there had been an opportunity to employ a range of techniques to encourage public participation. Moreover, time was an important factor: with more time a greater amount of work could have been done to reach out more widely. It is profoundly regrettable that the open part of the process, far from being a ‘public debate’, instead became a dialogue mainly restricted to people of a particular social

and academic background. The greatest failure of the debate is that it did not engage with a wider array of people. (Paragraph 31)

7. To engage with the wider public the debate needed to go into their living rooms, rather than be conducted in the village hall. With sufficient time and money to publicise and promote the debate, we have little doubt that it would have been possible to do so. (Paragraph 32)

Taking account of the debate

8. We endorse the view that it is critically important that the holding of the debate is seen to have an influence on the decisions subsequently made by Government. We recommend that in its response to the report of the public debate (and to this report) the Government set out exactly how it will take into account the outcomes of the debate in its decision-making about GM technology. In particular it should set out precisely the legal framework under which decisions about GM will be taken. (Paragraph 36)

Food Standards Agency

9. We would value an explanation from the Food Standards Agency of its decision to undertake a 'public debate' of its own about GM food, why it chose to do so at the time that it did, what was the cost to public funds of its initiative, and how its work relates to the other strands of the public debate. We would also be keen to learn of future plans for the Agency to study public opinion about GM food. (Paragraph 38)

In summary

10. The public debate was an imaginative initiative, but nonetheless represents an opportunity missed. Although other reasons for its failure can be found, including, no doubt, a degree of public apathy, two principal problems resulted from Government decisions: the tight deadline set for completion of the process, which meant that relevant data (the reports from the Strategy Unit and the GM Science Review Panel, and the outcome of the FSEs) was not available, and the paltry resources allocated to the debate. The Government, in its response to our report, must allay the suspicion that, having agreed to undertake a public debate, it did as little as it could to make it work. (Paragraph 41)
11. We trust that the Government will look seriously at the lessons to be learned from the conduct of the GM public debate. As we have made clear in this report, the main lesson is that wide-ranging consultative exercises such as the GM public debate must be adequately resourced and must be given enough time to be conducted properly. (Paragraph 42)

Minutes of proceedings

Wednesday 12 November 2003

Members present:

Mr David Curry, in the Chair

| | |
|--------------------|----------------------|
| Mr David Drew | Joan Ruddock |
| Patrick Hall | Mrs Gillian Shephard |
| Mr Michael Jack | Alan Simpson |
| Mr Mark Lazarowicz | David Taylor |
| Mr David Lepper | Paddy Tipping |
| Mr Austin Mitchell | Mr Bill Wiggin |
| Diana Organ | |

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report [*Conduct of the GM Public Debate*], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 42 read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Eighteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No.134 (Select committees (reports)) be applied to the Report.

Several papers were ordered to be appended to the Minutes of Evidence.

Ordered, That the Appendices to the Minutes of Evidence taken before the Committee be reported to the House.—(*The Chairman*).

Several memoranda were ordered to be reported to the House.

The Committee further deliberated.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 19 November at a quarter past Two o'clock.

Witnesses

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Wednesday 22 October 2003 | <i>Page</i> |
| Professor Malcolm Grant, GM Public Debate Steering Board | Ev 1 |
| Elliot Morley MP and Lucian Hudson, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | Ev 14 |

List of written evidence

| | |
|--|----------|
| Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | Ev 12 |
| Saffron Walden and District Friends of the Earth | Ev 24 |
| Joseph Mishan, Stort Valley Friends of the Earth | Ev 25 |
| GeneWatch UK | Ev 26 |
| Swindon Friends of the Earth | Ev 29 |
| MBP Carpenter | Ev 30 |
| The National Trust | Ev 30 |
| Cllr Margaret Sinclair, Glasgow City Council | Ev 31 |
| Jean Ide | Ev 31 |
| Agricultural Biotechnology Council (abc) | Ev 32,35 |
| Alan Simpson MP | Ev 37 |
| The National Consumer Council (NCC) | Ev 42 |
| Five Year Freeze | Ev 43 |
| Consumers' Association | Ev 46 |
| Munlochy GM Vigil | Ev 49 |
| The Understanding Risk Team and Collaborators | Ev 50 |
| Graham Brookes | Ev 56 |
| The Soil Association | Ev 56 |
| Richard Heller | Ev 58 |

List of unprinted written evidence

Additional papers have been received from the following and have been reported to the House but to save printing costs they have not been printed and copies have been placed in the House of Commons library where they may be inspected by members. Other copies are in the Record Office, House of Lords and are available to the public for inspection. Requests for inspection should be addressed to the Record Office, House of Lords, London SW1. (Tel 020 7219 3074) hours of inspection are from 9:30am to 5:00pm on Mondays to Fridays.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Annexes)

Professor Derek Burke

GeneWatch UK report on the conduct of the UK's public debate on GM crops and food

Swindon Friends of the Earth (Annex)

Consumers' Association (Annexes)

Reports from the Committee since 2001

Session 2002–03

| | | |
|--------------------|--|----------|
| Seventeenth Report | Biofuels | HC 929-I |
| Sixteenth Report | Vets and Veterinary Services | HC 703 |
| Fifteenth Report | New Covent Garden Market: a follow-up | HC 901 |
| Fourteenth Report | Gangmasters | HC 691 |
| Thirteenth Report | Poultry Farming in the United Kingdom (<i>Reply, HC 1219</i>) | HC 779-I |
| Twelfth Report | The Departmental Annual Report 2003 (<i>Reply, HC 1175</i>) | HC 832 |
| Eleventh Report | Rural Broadband (<i>Reply, HC 1174</i>) | HC 587 |
| Tenth Report | Horticulture Research International (<i>Reply, HC 1086</i>) | HC 873 |
| Ninth Report | The Delivery of Education in Rural Areas (<i>Reply, HC 1085</i>) | HC 467 |
| Eighth Report | The Future of Waste Management (<i>Reply, HC 1084</i>) | HC 385 |
| Seventh Report | Badgers and Bovine TB (<i>Reply, HC 831</i>) | HC 432 |
| Sixth Report | Rural Payments Agency (<i>Reply, HC 830</i>) | HC 382 |
| Fifth Report | The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (<i>Reply, HC 748</i>) | HC 394 |
| Fourth Report | Water Framework Directive (<i>Reply, HC 749</i>) | HC 130 |
| Third Report | The Mid-term Review of the Common Agricultural Policy (<i>Reply, HC 615</i>) | HC 151 |
| Second Report | Annual Report of the Committee 2002 | HC 269 |
| First Report | Reform of the Common Fisheries Policy (<i>Reply, HC 478</i>) | HC 110 |

Session 2001–02

| | | |
|----------------|--|--------|
| Tenth Report | The Role of Defra (<i>Reply, HC 340, Session 2002-03</i>) | HC 991 |
| Ninth Report | The Future of UK Agriculture in a Changing World (<i>Reply, HC 384, Session 2002-03</i>) | HC 550 |
| Eighth Report | Hazardous Waste (<i>Reply, HC 1225</i>) | HC 919 |
| Seventh Report | Illegal Meat Imports (<i>Reply, HC 1224</i>) | HC 968 |
| Sixth Report | Departmental Annual Report 2002 (<i>Reply, HC 1223</i>) | HC 969 |
| Fifth Report | Genetically Modified Organisms (<i>Reply, HC 1222</i>) | HC 767 |
| Fourth Report | Disposal of Refrigerators (<i>Reply, HC 1226</i>) | HC 673 |
| Third Report | Radioactive Waste: The Government's Consultation Process (<i>Reply, HC 1221</i>) | HC 407 |
| Second Report | The Countryside Agency (<i>Reply, HC 829</i>) | HC 386 |
| First Report | The Impact of Food and Mouth Disease (<i>Reply, HC 856</i>) | HC 323 |

Oral evidence

Taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on Wednesday 22 October 2003

Members present:

Mr David Curry, in the Chair

Mr Colin Breed
Mr David Drew
Patrick Hall
Mr Michael Jack
Mr Austin Mitchell

Diana Organ
Alan Simpson
David Taylor
Paddy Tipping
Mr Bill Wiggin

Witness: **Professor Malcolm Grant**, Chair, GM Public Debate Steering Board, examined.

Chairman: Professor Grant, welcome to the Committee. You have performed various services for government, I recall as local government reorganisation supreme at one stage so you have had a fairly diversified experience—

Mr Mitchell: Still crazy after all these years!

Q1 Chairman: We are inquiring really into the process of consultation. We are not inquiring into the outcome in the sense of taking judgments on where we fall against GM. No doubt there will be a stage when we will need to look at how the Government is responding to various threads of consultation which are now beginning to come together into a timetable. There is the process of consultation as we inquire into the whole question of disposal of radioactive waste and the way the Government consulted on that. I suppose the main criticism of this process was that necessarily it was always going to get hijacked by people who were basically campaigning for one argument or the other argument, and what one might call the ordinary “punter” either did not express a view or found it difficult to express a view in the light of the way feelings were being expressed and one could have predicted the outcome before it started. What is your feeling about that sort of central criticism of the process, of which you would be the instrument not the author of course?

Professor Grant: Thank you, Chairman, and thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee this afternoon. The process had somewhat divergent aims, one of which was to provoke public engagement in a deliberative process around a highly controversial issue of public policy and another of which was to deliver to the Government a cross-section of public opinion around the GM issue. To some extent these aims converged, to some extent they diverged. If you are to have a process of engagement it is hardly feasible to ration the parties who will engage themselves in the process. So when we embarked upon the deliberative process (which was our tier one meetings) we were anxious that we should not try to vet those who would come but to be as open and as encouraging as we possibly could. The consequence of that was that in those meetings there was a high

proportion of attendance of people who already held views around GM. They were not identical views but they were people who held views sufficiently strongly to encourage them to engage in those discussions. However, the debate also had other components to it. There were the tier two and tier three meetings which were really quite varied in their operation across the country and attracted different groups and different participation and then there was a stream, which you may wish to come back and talk to me a little further, which is the narrow but deep stream where we tried to engage with people who had not previously been exposed to the arguments surrounding GM, and to try to ensure methodologically with some degree of robustness that the views that we had heard from those engaging in the big open exercises were not wholly unrepresentative of public opinion as we could measure it from the small and narrow but deep exercise.

Q2 Chairman: If we take another issue, which I would imagine one would normally expect to be as emotionally charged as this debate, something like stem cell research, firstly I am not aware that the Government did any form of public consultation in the same sort of way but, equally, I am aware that the nature of the debate appears to have been a more intellectual process. There was profound debate in Parliament for example on this. Do you think your deeper seated part of that process did get to parts others did not reach and you were reaching a virgin level of opinion which gave you a greater accuracy of what people thought when they balanced the arguments, as opposed to opinion that went there to make sure its point of view predominated and was always heard?

Professor Grant: I would like to break my answer to that down into two parts, if I may. The first thing is that I would not dismiss the opinions that are held by people who have thought about the issues, even if they are people who are now engaged in campaigning stances on either side. These are important opinions to listen to and to assess and we certainly did engage with that community, many of whom felt they had not been listened to by the Government previously and here was an

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opportunity to feed into a more formal process to which the Government had pledged it would be listening. The second answer is to compare GM crops to stem cell research. Yes there was a most impressive debate in both Houses of Parliament around stem cell research but the issues and the way in which they engaged public opinion are somewhat different. What I found fascinating about GM crops is that it has done two things. One, it has brought home to people a spatial dimension where GM crops are grown in fields and people live in towns and villages and cities adjacent to fields, so there is a spatial component to it which is not evident in the case of stem cell research nor indeed in the case of most other human genetics research. The second component of it is consumerism. There is a relationship between the growing of GM crops and the production of GM food. There is a consumer element which is quite dominant in many of the debates we have had around GM which is cast in quite a different way in connection with human genetics where you will find often a very strong lobby of those who can see the advantages of genetics research, including stem cell research, and will argue for it, and which in the GM context tends to be polarised between industry which advocates the technology and opponents from NGOs and elsewhere who are against it. The polarisation is quite different in the two debates and it may therefore be that the way in which we need to engage with public opinion equally needs to be different.

Q3 Chairman: Did you discover anything from your soundings and hearings which surprised you? Let me expand my question. Before we started people had said, "What do you think the result will be?" I doubt if many people would have come up with conclusions radically different to the ones you found—supermarket reaction, consumer reaction, campaigning organisations reaction. Is there something in there which you would like to draw our attention to as something we might not have guessed, as it were, before we started?

Professor Grant: You will know I have been engaged in this for around four years now since my initial appointment to chair the AEBC so there were many things that did not surprise me in terms of the content of the opinions that were ventured in the course of the debate. Two things though did surprise me a little. One was the relationship between what we heard in narrow but deep discussions of people who previously had not been exposed to it who were put through a process which was a two-phase process and who came to voice opinions at the end of that which were not hugely dissimilar from the opinions we had heard in other parts of the debate. Not perhaps a surprise but certainly from my perspective a reassurance that we were not completely divergent. The second thing that surprised me is this. When I went and listened to some of these meetings the quality of the argument was really quite impressive. Yes, there was barracking in some of the meetings, yes, there was a repetition of well-rehearsed arguments, but I have to say on some occasions I was quite stunned by the

sincerity and the quality of the opinions that people were expressing. In terms of discourse with the public that was quite a remarkable achievement.

Q4 Mr Wiggin: The Agricultural Biotechnology Council has claimed that the outcome of the debate showed that 99.9% of UK citizens were not sufficiently interested to take part. What is your response to the specific claim by the ABC about these participants?

Professor Grant: I find that a slightly surprising suggestion because it is perfectly clear that the interest in GM across the country is quite widespread. 99.9% of the population failing to take part in meetings or discussions does not mean 99.9% of the population having no interest in the debate.

Q5 Mr Wiggin: They said 70% had been identified as originating from campaigning groups.

Professor Grant: 70% of what?

Q6 Mr Wiggin: Of people who responded to the feedback forms.

Professor Grant: That, I think, is a surprising estimate. We had something like 37,000 feedback forms. We put in place quite careful devices to try to ensure that the process was not captured. We took professional advice, we made sure that multiple returns could not be sent in, particularly on an electronic basis, and I have seen no evidence that would support a figure as high as 70%. We would be surprised, would we not, if it were the case that campaigning organisations on both sides of the debate had not somehow marshalled some support among their members to participate and submit the forms? I have no evidence of such a significant impact. Indeed, to me the sheer volume of response that we had suggests a much more broadly-based participative process.

Q7 Mr Mitchell: I question that. What makes you think that this estimate that 70% originated from campaigning groups is wrong?

Professor Grant: I have seen no evidence to justify it.

Q8 Mr Mitchell: They must have seen evidence in the replies you were getting to justify the claim and it seems a likely presupposition, does it not, because there is no way in which in this debate campaigning groups are going to be excluded from it? They are bound to try and pack it, as they may well have done. Whatever safeguards you put in place you cannot really stop that.

Professor Grant: Let me be clear about this then. I was concerned right at the beginning at the capacity for hijacking the responses, that people might get access to the software and might have the capacity to simply at the touch of a button send multiple distortive responses. I am satisfied from responses I have had from the COI and elsewhere that that has not occurred and that we have been able to safeguard against that. So far as the figure of how many responses might come from people who are members of organisations 70% strikes me as high, which is why I question it, but neither I nor anyone

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else has access to the affiliations of anyone who has responded in this way. That is why I am perplexed by the authoritative way in which the figure has been put to me this afternoon. We do not have the data to support such a suggestion. It may be right or it may be wrong; I do not have the data.

Q9 Mr Mitchell: But it was not a representative debate, was it? Two-thirds of the respondents claimed to have a degree and that would not be proportionate of the population at large. It is also very much a social group A and B debate.

Professor Grant: I think that if asked where we fell short of what we had set ourselves as a target it would be in that area. I would have hoped that we would have been much more successful in formenting discussion and debate amongst other social groups. It was almost an inevitability, I think, of some of the constraints with which we were faced with organising the debate, that it would prove hugely attractive to those who already had opinions about GM, which tended to be those with degrees and those from social classes A and B, but for the rest of it I have learned that the sheer effort that is required to get other people engaged and interested is enormous and we did what limited amount we could, but I have to say much more would need to be done were such an exercise to be repeated on a future occasion.

Q10 Mr Mitchell: You asked for the doubling of money up to £500,000 which eventually after a lot of grudging messing about you got. In what way did it make it more of a public debate and less of a specialist crank debate?

Professor Grant: I do not think that we could have done a debate that had integrity on the original budget. On the revised budget you will understand that we were still very severely constrained in what we could do. Our publicity budget was running on empty the whole time. I took a view that we should not spend money on expensive advertising when we had not enough money to spend on organising the events, the tool kit, the stimulus material and the other components that we thought were vital parts of it. I confess we used the grand launch on 3 June to try to attract the maximum publicity for the debate as a whole and, by and large, we succeeded in that. In order to attract a much wider range of people in the discussion you need a much bigger publicity budget and also I think a much more developed methodology for engagement with those groups, more networking, more time, more opportunity.

Q11 Mr Mitchell: You also need surely opinion polling? You need to be able to set opinions that you are getting which come from enthusiasts, maybe it is a cranks' picnic I do not know, but the weighing of the results does make it look as though it is an enthusiasts' picnic, an AB enthusiasts' picnic at that, and you need to weight that against public perceptions and public knowledge because in any kind of debate of this nature the public really are not going to get involved. It is a specialist thing and you have got to go to a website, you have got to go to a

meeting, you have got to put yourself out and that means you have got to be motivated. Cranks are motivated, specialists are motivated, people with opinions are motivated but the public is not and yet this is a public debate and you did not sound out the public.

Professor Grant: I am going to avoid some of the words you have used to describe the highly motivated members of the public who participated in this exercise.

Q12 Chairman: That is very mild by Austin's standards!

Professor Grant: Thank you, Chairman. We could have done the whole thing by opinion polls but it would not have delivered the richness of the discussion or the richness of results we have given to the government. Something else, when you talk about a public debate it seems to me that you are talking about a two-way process, not simply the taking of opinion at a particular point in time, its aggregation, its measurement and its reporting. You are talking about people being engaged in something which engages them in an intellectual debate. What happened on this occasion—and I would mark up as one of the modest successes of the process—was the extent that people said to us they had appreciated being asked to be involved in a major controversial area of public policy and I would not under-estimate that as a positive outcome of the process. We can do public opinion polls. Many others have done opinion polls around this issue. There is no shortage of polling material. There is polling material that covers the United Kingdom and there is polling material that covers the UK and Europe, there is the Eurobarometer. It has been done, it exists. We were trying to do something different. We were trying to see whether if people were given briefing material and if they were engaged in discussions and deliberation that added something of value to the process, and we believe that it has done that.

Q13 Mr Jack: I am sure you have read *GM Nation?* and paragraph 140 says: "However, in our view it confirms a general feeling, from all the evidence of the open debate. Broadly speaking it reflects the views of people who are regularly engaged in politics and current affairs. Such people are far more likely to be uncertain, suspicious or hostile towards GM and to have made up their minds about it." Do you agree with that paragraph?

Professor Grant: I did have responsibility overall for writing the report with my Steering Board so, yes, of course I agree with it, but I would stress to you it follows immediately on the heading summary "the more engaged the more likely to oppose GM". I think that is a legitimate finding, the more people had been engaged in the issues previously the more likely they were to oppose them.

Q14 Mr Jack: The reason I ask that question is that earlier in the document it lays emphasis on the nature of the framework for the exchange of views in that for those of us, if you like, in the parliamentary tradition we would expect there to be speakers for

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and against and some decisions made. You deliberately went against that as a format with a view to having responses to particular themes of thought, and the impression I get from this is that it is not a debate where the bulk of the audience had not made their mind up and could be wooed by the speakers; it was a high-quality exchange of views from an audience who had high-quality knowledge and who had come to exchange that without the idea of a debate to say, "Do I agree or disagree based on what I have heard?" Is that a fair summary of what happened?

Professor Grant: No, it is not because the events that were staged were really quite different in character. It is probably true to an extent of the so-called tier one debates. We held six of these big public meetings and at those meetings there were no speakers on podiums because we deliberately did not want that, we deliberately did not want the conventional nature of the debate where opposed adversarial views are expressed and the public may ask a few questions but still go away as perhaps uninformed as they arrived. We wanted on those occasions—and this rather surprised many participants—to sit around a table and discuss and debate. However, in tiers two and three there were many more variants on that theme. I chaired a major event in Cambridge which had over 200 people turning up on a hot July evening where there were speakers and there were questions and there were exchanges but where there were, I thought, remarkably high-quality levels of debate and argument, but I would have to say amongst the Cambridge audience the proportion of degree holders was probably significantly higher than in the nation at large. My short answer to your question was that there was great variation in the style of meetings.

Q15 Paddy Tipping: Could we talk about the debate before the debate which was the debate about money and resources for this. You were at that time, Professor Grant, on the record as wanting £1.25 million; is that right?

Professor Grant: Let me break that down, if I may. Taking you through chronologically, the idea of the debate came out of the AEBC which put forward, upon further invitation from the Government, a menu of possible events and a very general picture of what they might cost. That was then shared by the Government with the COI which costed it out at a quarter of a million. Once we had looked at that and in discussion with COI decided that a quarter of a million would not do it, the COI prepared for us a menu of possibilities which ranged from £0.5 million to £1.2 million. In further discussions with the Government we were eventually offered a doubling of our original budget which brought it up to half a million. How much it costs to run a public debate is the dilemma of how long is a piece of string. I am sure that with a much enhanced budget you could do a much enhanced debate. We based our costings on two indicators, one was the sort of event that we would like to run. Another was looking at what had happened in other countries. COI did for us a study of the cost of running exercises such as this in the

Netherlands and in New Zealand. New Zealand had a Royal Commission and four members who by the end of the period were working full time on this with a large secretariat and their total cost was around £2 million. Likewise with the Netherlands exercise. The UK has had a public debate for half a million. I have to say were you to ask me would I do it again I would say absolutely not. With those constraints I would not do it.

Q16 Paddy Tipping: So if the Secretary of State were to say to you, "Malcolm, we did get it wrong, we would like you to do it again, what would be the cost this time?" what would you be bidding for?

Professor Grant: I would start by finding out what we and our stakeholders thought had been successful about the exercise that we have just been through and what had been unsuccessful. I have shared with you my view that the broader public reach that we had sought was not successful and I would take professional advice as to how we could meet our targets on that front. I fear from my experience over the last few months that it would be a significant sum necessary to achieve that.

Q17 Paddy Tipping: Let me be clear about that because the Committee will want to be clear about it. In a sense you are saying, in retrospect, "Having made a judgment on this, the amount of money I was offered, half a million, was not satisfactory?"

Professor Grant: It was not satisfactory and I knew that at the beginning. What I then did was spend quite a lot of time going out and talking to other organisations to see whether we could get some increases on it. I had many fine expressions of interest and support, none of them accompanied by a cheque. You will however see at the back of the report we were successful in raising a significant amount of money to support the half a million that we had been given. I would also suggest to you that COI did not make a profit on the exercise. The true cost of this, if you take the real cost of people's time including my Steering Board—who you must realise all had full-time jobs elsewhere and put an enormous amount of effort into it and I need publicly to say just how grateful I am to them for all that has gone into this—if we take that full cost, you will find it is much, much more than half and million and I would say over £1 million.

Q18 Paddy Tipping: Let me just extend this because this is an important exercise. The Chairman talked about the debate on stem cell research. We are going to have a public debate, allegedly, on the disposal of nuclear waste. I know you have got a lot of experience on involving and engaging the public. What are the broader issues, the broader parameters of costing debates of this kind? What could the Government as a corporate body have learnt from this process that has just begun about costing debates? How do you put a value on them?

Professor Grant: It is a very difficult question to answer in the abstract. What other models have we got? I hesitate to mention the euro roadshow in this gathering but we are here in quite untried territory.

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What we were doing was, we hoped, genuinely innovative and unusual. You will not find models for this elsewhere in the UK, you will not find them elsewhere in the world. Therefore, I am exceptionally hesitant to try and put a figure on the total sum. I would however say to a government that wanted to do it again, "You need to be absolutely clear what your objectives are, you need to be absolutely clear how you are going to measure whether you have achieved them, and you need to be clear also as to how you are going to provoke public interest and participation." Nuclear waste disposal is a completely different issue from GM. It has a spatial implication but it also had a high NIMBY consequence, so your audiences are different. I think the mode of participation would need to be different. There is no one size fits all in this area.

Q19 Paddy Tipping: Just finally, had there been more resources available would you have done more publicity work? You said as a matter of course you had decided not to do the big adverts. Had there been more resources available, would you have done that?

Professor Grant: Yes. It was not just the monetary constraint but the time constraint. I think we would have developed the relationship with the media that we needed to. Our media presence was deliberately, for the same reason, very strong in regional radio and regional press and we took advantage of that because that is a resource that is more readily available, but we could not afford to pay for publicity.

Q20 Mr Breed: You do not happen to know how much the Government has budgeted for GM research and development annually?

Professor Grant: No, I do not. The figure that has been attached to the total cost of the field trials has been variously £5 to £6 million.

Q21 Mr Breed: Per year?

Professor Grant: No, not per year, the total.

Q22 Mr Breed: The field trials is only a very small part of the overall amount that has gone into the R&D side of GM?

Professor Grant: I believe so.

Q23 Mr Breed: So relative to that half a million was totally insignificant?

Professor Grant: They are your words.

Q24 David Taylor: Professor Grant, in your evidence so far you have talked of some of the qualities that you hoped the debate might have and the objectives of the process and you have talked about the need for rich discussion and people that are involved going wider, I paraphrase what you might have said, than the usual suspects, but would you agree with me that at least one quality it ought to have had is that the debate ought to have been at arm's length from government?

Professor Grant: Yes, we insisted upon that at the beginning and the Government, I think quite rightly, took our advice. I was asked then by the Government to appoint a Steering Board and I was given complete freedom in how I appointed the Steering Board. I deliberately chose six people who were already members of the AEBC because they had had experience of working together. It takes a long time to get a good working relationship between people who come to an issue with passionately different views and the AEBC has proven that you can do that and we wanted to build on that. We then brought on board four other people who would help to develop our relationship with the NGO community and with the industry. Indeed, the industry representative Paul Rylott was later appointed to the AEBC. We brought in Gary Kass from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology because of his expertise and also Lucian Hudson from Defra to help us manage the contract. All of that was completely independent from government. Being independent from government can sometimes be a very lonely and awkward position, but I can assure you that we took this very seriously. My exchanges with the Secretary of State and ministers in the devolved administrations have been in the public domain. They have gone on the website when we have done that. 14 of the meetings of the Steering Board were in public. We have tried to run this on an open and transparent basis because throughout it people were saying to us "Why should we trust you? Isn't this a government PR exercise?" In order to try and dispel that we went back to the Secretary of State and said, "We really need a statement of the intent by the Government as to what you are going to do with the outcome of the debate. Are you going to take this seriously and commit to doing it?" Mrs Beckett in due course gave us that statement and committed the Government to responding in public to the outcome of the debate. All of that has been critical. Without that independence from government I think it would have been impossible to persuade people to take the debate seriously.

Q25 David Taylor: I am not questioning the appointment of the people who were involved on the PDSB but did that search for independence not take an early knock when you appointed the Central Office of Information to do most of the donkey work in the organisation of the whole process? Did those same people not have a succession of meetings not always in the public arena with Defra officials during the planning process? Could not the dispassionate observer be forgiven for thinking that what had started out as an attempt to be at arm's length from government had finished with falling into the arms of government with the agenda that it might have? You did not have the advantage three hours or so ago, it would be, in PMQs when the Prime Minister was asked about the GM debate. Subjecting what he said to textual analysis it goes as follows approximately: "It is important that we do not reach a premature conclusion, but actually I am quite convinced by the evidence myself." I am

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paraphrasing a little but can you not see why people are a little cynical when the COI was there, our own “Ministry for Truth” was there with you at those early stages?

Professor Grant: The COI issue is a very difficult one. We were presented with a very difficult choice to make in August/September last year. There was pressure for us to get on with running a debate. You know that we had the timescale eventually enlarged (although perhaps not ideally). The two or three advantages of COI, as we saw it, were first that they did have experience in running the sort of large-scale events that we were contemplating and we subsequently discovered that they had a research capacity that was tremendously useful to us, so that there were advantages in that narrow operational sense to using them. Thirdly, however, there was a financial advantage which was that the COI have a special registered status under EU procurement law which meant that we could through them procure the subcontractors to do the various bits of work that we wanted without having to go through a lengthy OJEC process and so that also weighed with us. Finally, if I am not too cynical, what weighed with us was the notion that since the COI had priced this at this amount we could reasonably expect them to be good to their pricing and to deliver at that amount. We had to balance that, as you rightly say, against the risk that here we were engaging with an arm’s length agency of government.

Q26 David Taylor: The Five Year Freeze campaign director was a member of the PDSB; is that correct?

Professor Grant: Yes, she was.

Q27 David Taylor: In evidence to us we hear that this was not really an open decision about who to appoint, it was a coerced “Hobson’s Choice” type of approach where the animal concerned proved to be a bit of a carthorse?

Professor Grant: I would not share that entirely.

Q28 David Taylor: They did not say that. I added that little bit on but they said the first part of that.

Professor Grant: I am grateful for that clarification but we did not jump into this lightly. We spent a lot of time with COI members because we thought they had a very significant learning curve, as did we, to try to understand what it was we wanted to do. We spent a lot of time doing that and it was only when we were encouraged to see they could understand what our objectives were and were able to work with us that we felt greater confidence in going with them. The degree of coercion, yes, it was there. Remember, that during this process we were trying to get together a coherent debate against an impossible timescale. For us to have had to go out in OJEC for a prime contractor would have delayed that and made it impossible for us to achieve any sort of debate activity within that original timescale.

Q29 David Taylor: What do you say to the Consumers’ Association—and I declare a subscription to that organisation—who say that information from the COI was always vague and

non-committal and even the Five Year Freeze people, whose campaign director was a fellow member, were curate’s eggish about the performance of the COI? They had competence in the delivery of certain things but there were other areas, they said, particularly on the design of the open and deliberative element of debate where their lack of experience showed. In the immortal words of the first post-War Labour Prime Minister Attlee, the COI “were not up to it”, were they?

Professor Grant: The COI had a very difficult task. They were dealing with a Steering Board who insisted on meeting in public (as we felt was wholly appropriate) and who had ideas for dealing with the public debate which were untried and which had not been done elsewhere. Anybody dealing with us would have had that problem. I think we had day-to-day issues with the COI which we tried to resolve by setting up what we called advisory groups. In other words, I would invite members of the Steering Board in small groups to deal at operational level with COI officials. What we were trying to do in all of this was to balance at every opportunity the competing interests on the Steering Board so that each of those meetings had to have somebody from this bit and somebody from this bit and somebody from this bit. We achieved an enormous amount through using Steering Board members in a way that I would never have wished to use them, which was doing a lot of the detailed operational work rather than standing back and steering. What we wished to do was steer a highly professional delivery of the operation and we had to do, to my mind, too much detailed management.

Q30 Mr Drew: If we can look at the role of government ministers both in advance of the consultation, during the consultation and indeed after the consultation, do you wish that they had come off the fence and actually said something meaningful? Michael Meacher obviously subsequently has made very clear what his position is. Have government ministers got a role to play in this to say, “Look, this is where we stand on this”, and at least the public can be clear how they then will respond to that level of leadership.

Professor Grant: I would have preferred that. Remember also I was dealing with three ministers, in other words with the Secretary of State and with the ministers for the two (at that stage) devolved administrations. I think it would have given sharper counterpoint to the debate had there been a statement of Government policy, even that “the Government was minded that GM should go ahead in the United Kingdom for the following reasons . . .” It might have given a sharper focus to the debate than the official Government position which is that it is neither for nor against GM, because that was a position that was challenged not only in the debate but also widely in the media whilst the debate was going on. I believe, again with hindsight—although not entirely with hindsight because it was a matter the Steering Board did raise

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with ministers at the time—it would have been slightly better to have had a sharper position statement from them.

Q31 Mr Drew: Are you saying the lack of focus and lack of clarity made the debate that much more difficult to advertise just because people either perceived the Government had made its mind up but was not prepared to admit to that or, more particularly, was basically being led by the debate and was holding back?

Professor Grant: No, I would not go as far as that. I just feel that it would have helped to sharpen the debate to have a more controversial statement of government policy than one that was neither for nor against. There was a dilemma of course as the debate was proceeding which was the Government was coming under pressure to participate in EU decision-making around part C consents for the deliberate release of GMOs into the environment and it was clear it was having to take a view in that context and to respond intelligently to the Commission.

Q32 Mr Drew: Have you had conversations with ministers, if nothing else, to steel you for the debate? Have they actually sought your opinion since the debate took place?

Professor Grant: No. And so great is our independence from the ministers that they have not yet written to thank the Steering Board for its work in the debate.

Q33 Mr Drew: Does that say something, that they are in fact distancing themselves?

Professor Grant: I am sure it does!

Chairman: They are not gentlemen.

Q34 Mr Mitchell: Can I be clear which are you saying that ministers might have done more to support and publicise the debate?

Professor Grant: Yes, I think they might have. They did give us an undertaking at the beginning that they would do so and indeed the Secretary of State did in a speech at the Royal Society express support for the debate. But remember of course that a lot of other things were going on at the same time and I would say one critical message to the Committee this afternoon is that the public debate was one part of a great variety of activity. We had alongside us the science review being conducted by Sir David King and the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit review. We worked very hard right from the beginning to ensure that those three strands did not go off in different directions, they were procedurally tied together. We did the framing of the issues through the public discussion workshops, they fed into the Strategy Unit and the Science Review, so there was a deal of activity that ministers were engaged in and were giving their support to in addition to the public debate. We worked very hard to try and stitch the package together as one.

Q35 Mr Mitchell: So it did not do enough. Are you also saying that what they were saying was not clear enough?

Professor Grant: It was perfectly clear; they said they were neither for nor against GM.

Q36 Mr Mitchell: So that weakened the debate because there was nothing there to either react for or against?

Professor Grant: No, I am sure that ministers were being very straightforward.

Q37 David Taylor: Uniquely so!

Professor Grant: They were hesitating to express their view in advance of the debate.

Q38 Mr Mitchell: What was the assumption about government policy made by people in the debate? I can see what you mean, I think that is dead right, but it seems to have gone through several phases. We came in enthusiastic about GM as an advance for British science, so on and so forth, a new pro-scientific attitude. Then it began to get more cautious and people thought, "There is trouble here. There are a lot of people loose in the land like Alan here who are going to create trouble." They got involved in the European dimension and now it seems to have come round to, "We had better give this a push and get rid of old Meacher because he is cool on the idea and bring in somebody who is going to push it forward." That is my reading! What was the assumption of the people taking part in the debate? Were they assuming that the Government was going to be for it eventually?

Professor Grant: I do not want to generalise too much. People come into this with widely varying assumptions but one of our key findings, as you see from our report, is some mistrust of government. People are seeking some surrogate form of decision-making which is independent from government which has expertise in which people feel they can repose trust and confidence. To go back to one thing, by the end of this process you have got these three reports, you have got the FSE results, you will (I hope) have soon from the AEBC the report on co-existence and the government will be better equipped than any other government in the world has been around GM. They will have more strands of information and intelligence to analyse and on which to make some intelligent decisions and that is not to be under-estimated.

Q39 Mr Drew: Just in conclusion, so as not to paraphrase you wrongly, it sounds in Austin's terminology that to some extent you have been "hung out to dry" and that ministers can turn round and say, "Well, we had that consultation but not a great many people took part. It was bound to be the interest groups and we will go along our own sweet way except that is a bit dodgy because politically this is like hunting. Everyone has made their mind up. There is no middle way (dare I say). You are either for it, which is very much the minority, or against it and what is the point of pushing water uphill?" So you have made it clear to me that with the benefit of

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hindsight the consultation was not helpful in some respects even though overall there is a lot of information. Do you not feel a bit vulnerable because you have done a lot of the government donkey work for it and you have not even got any thanks for it?

Professor Grant: No, I do not share that analysis. I think that when people come to look back on this exercise they might share my rather hesitant feeling that it has been a success. If the Government were to ignore the outcome they could not hope to engage public opinion in a comparable exercise on any other front in future. This has been, I think, a highly symbolic exercise in public trust and government. The public have put their faith in participating in this exercise on the basis of a pledge by ministers that they would be listened to. If that pledge proves worthless how will you persuade your constituents in the future to participate in other exercises? I think there is a fundamental issue of public trust involved in this and I therefore do not share Mr Drew's analysis of my position nor indeed of the exercise as a whole.

Chairman: Patrick has a supplementary and then Diana is going to want to pursue that a little bit further.

Q40 Patrick Hall: Picking up from the earlier remarks about whether or not ministers could have been more helpful in stimulating a debate (and of course this select committee is independently administered) what could ministers have done? If ministers had said they were against GM there was no debate to be had and if they said strongly and controversially they were in favour of GM then that would have surely undermined the debate because it would strengthen those who say the Government has made its mind up anyway and will not listen to the debate. I just throw that in. Can I ask maybe the main question which is that you touched on the fact that what has happened here (with its limitations perhaps) is nonetheless valuable if one looks at what has or has not happened elsewhere. Did you have time to do a quick review of any evidence of public debate in other countries. The United States and other parts of the world have committed themselves to GM to an incredible extent I suspect without much prior public debate. Did you have time to look at that international situation?

Professor Grant: Yes we did and I commend to you a full report the COI did for us looking at debates, discussions or consultations that had taken place in other countries. The two leading ones were ones that I mentioned earlier in New Zealand and the Netherlands. One thing about both of those examples (and I think it is probably true of other countries where similar discussions have taken place) is that at a certain point in each of those processes there was a fragmentation of the stakeholders by which I mean a number of the environmental NGOs walked out of the process and no longer found themselves committed to it. One thing that this Steering Board has done and delivered to you and to ministers is a community that has supported a process. We have not at any

time lost our stakeholders. We have managed to hold them together around the process. That is, again, a tribute to the Steering Board who are pretty diverse people. They actually shared one common thing, which was a commitment to making the debate work.

Q41 Diana Organ: I am glad that you said that in the responses that you had there seemed to be some mistrust of Government. I think I would be more worried if there was not some mistrust of Government, the whole point of having a debate is that people will have differing views. Patrick Hall raised the point that you had said that you wanted a sharper counterpoint because you would have preferred a stronger statement from ministers, but is not the whole point of this exercise that Government is waiting for the result of the consultation, what is it that people have got to say in the debate, otherwise it will be, as many said in their memoranda to us, a window dressing exercise? How much was it a window dressing exercise?

Professor Grant: I can assure you from my position there was no window and no dressing. We were engaged in this to make it work. None of us on that committee had any brief for Government. What we did have a commitment to was being true to our promise to deliver an effective public debate. Going back to your question about what ministers might have said, the political landscape of the whole GM debate has been shifting quite subtly almost day-by-day throughout this whole process. At the beginning the dilemma that I could see was that ministers were being squeezed. On the one hand they had a sceptical public and a consumer reaction against GM, on the other hand they were locked into decision-making under European Directive 2001/18 which has a very narrow set of criteria for the release of GMOs into the environment, but in the meantime that started to change. It started to change not least because of the science review, the Farm Scale Evaluations, the new work that is now being done on co-existence which will amend that Directive and actually allow Member States to set up co-existence rules which would otherwise cut across the pure criteria of the Directive. So the Government has more space now than it had at the outset of the process. At the outset of the process it seemed to be saying to people, "We are holding a big public debate but at the same time we are having to participate in decision-making in a very narrow framework under the Directive".

Q42 Diana Organ: The public put their faith in this exercise, which I have to say is an unusual exercise and if anything we are to be congratulated that we have done this engagement, it is an extension of democracy, but it is a double-edged sword. It is no good doing it unless there is a recognition by the people who have been involved in the debate that actually the consultation has been listened to. What would you want to see in terms of Government policy as a result of this debate that would give you a measure of success, that said that this debate was worthwhile and successful because Government is saying this or doing that in response?

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Professor Grant: What I would like to see the Government do, and as they have promised to do, is to respond to the debate in public and to identify in future policy making how it is that the debate has been taken into account and what effect it has had on Government thinking. I think that is the simplest and most fundamental expectation that we should have of Government. How and when they do that is very much a matter for your next witness.

Q43 Diana Organ: If the Government does not reflect the findings of the debate in its decisions, will the whole exercise have been a failure?

Professor Grant: Yes.

Q44 Diana Organ: So you want the consultation to have had a real effect on Government policy?

Professor Grant: I want the Government to be able to demonstrate, as it has promised to do, how it has taken into account the findings from the debate.

Diana Organ: As a result of the debate there was obviously genuinely across the board an anti-GM response. In recent days, of course, because of farm trials it has added extra information to the whole debate because the scientific evidence that is coming back from the farm trials, and I know we are not going into that in this inquiry—

Chairman: No, we are not.

Q45 Diana Organ: We are not and I do not want to go into that. What I am saying is let us say the information that had come from the scientific study was that actually GM was okay for the environment and did not harm biodiversity but the consultation that had gone out to the public came back and said “We do not want it”, if the Government then said “In our policy we are all for GM”, that would still be a failure, would it not, because you have not influenced Government decision making?

Professor Grant: There is a lot of hypothesis in that. One thing I would stress is the range of views that we had from the public on different issues. It was not just about the science. Indeed, it is interesting that this is not a debate about science. This is a debate about a number of issues and one of them is to do with the ownership of the technology, the impact of the technology potentially on less developed countries. It is to do with the consumer response to GM. It may well be that if the FSEs had gone the other way and GM crops were grown in the UK, nonetheless there would still be a significant consumer reaction against that. There are big issues in this debate and I think it will be interesting to see how the Government responds to all of them.

Q46 Mr Breed: Somewhat ironically at this time we are coming to talk about the timing of the debate in a few moments, both in terms of its duration and the period of the year in which it took place. I recognise there were some difficulties in terms of devolved administrations having their own elections and so on, but could you give us some comments first of all on the duration of the exercise. Was it, in fact, long enough? Could it have been longer and, if so, would it have helped? In other words, was it too short? In

that context, it has been reported to me that in some cases it was very difficult to get hold of the packs for people to have their own debates in that period of time. There were quite a few people organising their own public debates and wanting to have the packs but apparently they were extremely difficult to get hold of. Then there was the case of the farmers themselves because that period was probably one of the busiest periods of time of their work, harvesting and everything else. Do you think that the timing in the year did have an effect on farmers’ ability to be able to participate actively in the debate itself?

Professor Grant: First of all, duration: six weeks was too short. We had not wished for six weeks but we were working, however, against an iron cast requirement from the Government that we should report by the end of September and our timing came back from there. In my view the right time would have been about three months, no longer.

Q47 Mr Breed: Had that been the case it would have also included the field trials results and everything else.

Professor Grant: Let me come to that because that was always a moving feast. Three months is ample, I think, it focuses attention for that period and that is long enough. That was the advice that we had from other experiences elsewhere in the world. As to the timing of those three months, again my preference would have been for not doing it in the summer obviously because it is not only farmers who may be disadvantaged (although I understand they work all year round), but also universities and schools who I would very much have wanted to try to engage and this was the worst possible time to do that. There was an issue around the timing of elections in devolved administrations which postponed the start of the debate and the squeeze at the end of the debate because of the Secretary of State’s insistence about the closing time. Also, my preference would have been to have been able to have extended the period of the debate so as to take into account the findings of the Strategy Unit and of the science review and of the FSEs. Each of those would have enhanced and enriched the debate that we had.

Q48 Alan Simpson: I take the points that you make about the seriousness with which the Government needs to take the findings of the debate because it does have much wider implications around the issue of trust. I was just a bit more surprised that your view about what lessons are to be learned, although they are quite specific for the Government, are less self-critical about your own role in that and the remit given to any similar body. I ought to say I have an interesting relationship with the debates because I took part in a number of them, got banned from one of them and was providing solace for quite a large number of groups in locations who were not able to get into them. I am just surprised that until you just responded to Colin’s point, you had nothing to say that I found useful about the sequence of the debate. Much of the criticism that I came across was about the public being able to take part in a debate in

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advance of essential evidence that ought to have been part of that debate, so many people felt conned by the sequence. You just mentioned that you would have liked to have expanded the debate to be able to incorporate the results of the Science Panel and the farm trials. Would it not have been better to have had the sequence the other way around so the evidence was available before the public were asked to debate it?

Professor Grant: Yes.

Q49 Alan Simpson: So it is not a question of expanding the timetable, we should have had the evidence base in place to be offered to the public before the public were asked to participate?

Professor Grant: Yes. When the Secretary of State set up the whole process, she did so on the basis of those three strands moving together. We were very anxious to try to ensure that the economics review and the science review fed into the public debate. Ultimately, the timing of the publication of those two documents made that very difficult, that was right towards the end of our period. The FSEs, of course, were entirely outside our control. Our original assumption had been that they would be published in the summer but, as everybody knows, they were not published until October, so that was well after the period of the debate. Had they been published earlier they would have been a very important part of the evidence for the debate. There is no perfect time to conduct a debate like this because there is always additional evidence going to come along. I think you would be right to conclude with hindsight that this timing was imperfect. You also asked me about self-criticism of the role of the Steering Board and myself in the process and I can be very frank on this. There were certain things over which we had no control and there is a question as to whether we should have gone ahead on that basis. I say today that I accept complete responsibility, I am the person whose neck is on the block. I think that with hindsight and with more time we could have made much more use of the six weeks with more advance planning and an ability to ensure that we had properly anticipated the level of demand for people to attend these meetings, but we had not. We had not expected anything like 600 meetings. I have to confess, we had expected something like 100 or 200, which would have been a stunning success for us, but 600 was beyond our comprehension and, in fact, when we were given that figure by COI we insisted on double checking it to make certain that it had credibility and, indeed, it had.

Q50 Alan Simpson: I take it that you would be advising us to look carefully at the sequencing of similar debates and consultations. Can I move on to my second reservation about your own role *vis à vis* the responsibilities to the public. I came across quite a large amount of criticism about the paucity of the briefings. That was not necessarily about taking a position on the areas that were under scientific dispute but at least being honest about what was in dispute, so in terms of the background information for the public were you really happy that what you

said had nothing that addressed issues about horizontal gene transfer, about the hot spots in terms of growth promoters within the technology itself, which is open to quite serious scientific dispute, about issues relating to antibiotic marker resistance, issues of long-term contamination. All of those appear to be singularly absent from an offer of what it was that was under dispute. I am really concerned that these were issues that invariably came up at all the meetings that I was at but did not figure in the background briefings that you offered the public.

Professor Grant: I would go further.

Q51 Alan Simpson: I have always been too modest in my criticism.

Professor Grant: I think the criticism of the briefing material, and indeed the whole toolkit, was not just the content, although there was an issue around how much you could load into this without it becoming top heavy, but it was our ambition that this should be stimulus material and in the end "stimulus" was not the word that you would apply to it. It started as being highly stimulating material because we had gone out to our various stakeholders and asked them to provide it to us and we were preparing a document which brought in all the stakeholders so those who were advancing all of these arguments and positions would have a say in what appeared. However, we then used a firm to try to help us to put it into plain and simple English, it was a communication of science exercise, if you like, and it came out of that process rather naked and stripped of the passion that it had had when it had gone in. By this stage we were faced, I am afraid, with the dilemma of do we pull the plug on it altogether or do we go ahead with what we have got. Since we had expressed right from the beginning that one of the objectives was to at least to pour information into the public domain to allow people to have a basis for discussion we had no choice but to go ahead with it. Can I just stress to you in preparing this information the pull factor that was exerted throughout all of this. These are hotly contested issues and I can show you the e-mail traffic that we endured during that process. It was very fortunate that we were able to get anything out at the end at all and I think probably a fairly good reason for it being rather anodyne and limited.

Q52 Alan Simpson: In a way that is exactly what I am uncomfortable about, that that is the nature of the debate, it has been hotly contested, it is passionately felt on both sides, but what a lot of people seemed to be raising in meetings I went to was to understand what it was that was being argued about. It was the anodyne nature of things that made people feel the big issues under dispute were actually being slipped past them. I suppose I am just saying in how you deal with that e-mail traffic and the disputes, what we ought to learn surely is not to take the passion out of the information base.

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Professor Grant: Our Steering Board were unanimous about that afterwards. At the time we had no time to reinject passion and reach unanimous agreement that this was the toolkit that we could run with.

Q53 Alan Simpson: The other element that seemed to generate quite a lot of anger was just about the remit that you work to. It seemed to me that quite a lot of people were objecting to the framework of the debate insofar as it excluded fairly fundamental questions, not about toxicity, contamination or liability but whether these were even the appropriate food and farming choices that they wanted to address: was this needed; were there other farming choices? Somehow the technology debate was cast as the entire stage when, in fact, it was a fragment of the stage around the sort of food economy that people wish to live in. Would you accept that none of that came through in the information base that you had and that ought to be part of a wider remit that we try to set for people like yourselves in conducting debates of this nature?

Professor Grant: Certainly I agree with the latter point. So far as the earlier point is concerned, there are two answers. First of all, the general framework which the Government set for the debate was that it was framed in terms of GM issues, but more particularly we decided that we should not set the precise parameters, and nor should the Government, we should take that broad remit and run it across a group of members of the public through the so-called Foundation Discussion workshops, and from there work up the issues that they felt were the appropriate ones for the debate. It was a bottom-up framing exercise which we felt was intellectually and fundamentally important to the exercise, even though it may well have meant that some of the issues that you have raised, which are highly technical in many respects, escaped from that initial framing process.

Q54 Alan Simpson: Would it have helped if local authorities and health authorities had actually been instructed to set up their own debates as part of the national framework you were to generate debate on?

Professor Grant: Instructing local authorities is never an easy thing to do. Certainly we had excellent co-operation from many of them and, indeed, for many of them the debate is going on. I am speaking at one on Monday run by Hampshire County Council. The conversation has not finished simply because we have submitted our report.

Q55 Diana Organ: You have talked about some of the principal lessons to be learned from having done this. You have talked about the cost, you have talked about the timing and the clear objectives that are needed, but you did say that you were concerned that the broader public reach had not been successful. A colleague mentioned that there was a meeting locally for him but it seemed to be in a rather middle class village hall. You were concerned

yourself about the timing and worried about the universities not being around. You seem to be worried about middle class villages having access and university professors being able to go. I just wonder what you would do as a lesson to be learned to have a broader reach so that we can carry out these debates so a much broader cross-section of the public could find it easier to participate?

Professor Grant: I would just stress that I was not at all interested in university professors.

Q56 Diana Organ: But you mentioned the timetable was when the university holidays were on.

Professor Grant: The majority of people in universities are students and they were certainly a community that I would have wanted to engage. July is the worst possible time of the year for students.

Diana Organ: They have done their exams and they are pissed.

Chairman: Sorry, Diana suffers from nostalgia.

Q57 Diana Organ: I have a daughter at university.

Professor Grant: It is the first question that has thrown me completely.

Q58 Diana Organ: If you were having to do this again, what would you do to make it easier for a much broader cross-section of the public to get involved?

Professor Grant: I think this involves a lot more work. We did what limited amount we could but it was more on the basis of an advanced focus group methodology, in other words bringing in people who had not been exposed to the issues, putting them through two meetings, giving them the opportunity between the meetings to think further and to research further on some of the issues. I think there is an enormously rich methodology that can be developed during that. That still does not reach across to the general public, it still does not give the general public a feeling that they are being engaged in the debate. We have engaged maybe 40, 50, 60, 70,000 people in the debate, I do not know how many ultimately, and that is a remarkable achievement, but you are right to say it is limited to a smallish group of self-engagers. To get to the other group I think is an enormous problem. Normally people will engage in discussions around GM when they are in the supermarket and facing the shelf and asking themselves what does it mean. Supermarkets at the moment do not offer them that choice but, in the event that they were to, that is where people come up against GM as a real issue. Otherwise, as you have seen, when people came into our discussion groups when asked to list what issues were worrying them at that moment, GM was not normally on the list to start with, it was only when you started picking away at it that it emerged as an issue.

Chairman: Thank you very much indeed for giving evidence. If there are points you wish to make when you reflect upon this then we will be very happy to receive them and we may wish to come to you for some clarification. You have been very helpful, thank you.

Memorandum submitted by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (A1)

BACKGROUND

1. The GM public debate arose from a recommendation in the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission's report "Crops on Trial" in September 2001. The Government asked the AEBC for advice on how this could best be carried out and the AEBC provided further advice in April 2002 (Annex A) [Not Printed].

2. The Secretary of State announced in May 2002 that Government intended to accept the AEBC's recommendations for a full and informed debate, and that there would also be two further strands of activity linked to the debate: a study into the costs and benefits of GM crops, and a review of the science. The Secretary of State made a further announcement in July 2002 providing additional details about the three strands of the GM dialogue and announcing that the budget for the debate would be £250,000, co-funded by the UK Government and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Annex B) [Not Printed].

3. Government accepted the AEBC's recommendation for an independent Steering Board to oversee the public debate. The Secretary of State invited Professor Malcolm Grant, the AEBC chair, to chair the Steering Board and to appoint its members, having regard to the need to maintain diversity and have a balance of views and perspectives. All members of the Steering Board were appointed in a personal capacity rather than as representatives of particular organisations, although Defra's Director of Communications was also appointed to the Board with particular responsibility to ensure proper accountability for the expenditure of public funds.

4. A detailed chronology of the public debate can be found at Annex C.

FUNDING FOR THE DEBATE

5. In their advice submitted in April 2002, the AEBC set out a proposed programme of events for the debate and indicated that the whole programme would cost "a few hundred thousand pounds" (see paragraph 46 of the AEBC's advice at Annex A)[Not Printed]. The Government then asked COI, the Government's executive agency for communications procurement, to provide an estimate of the likely costs of such a debate. COI's own preliminary estimate was that a debate programme could be delivered for £253,000 (see Annex to COI's advice at Annex D) [Not Printed]. On the basis of COI's advice, Government assigned an initial budget of £250,000 for the debate. The funding comprised contributions from Defra, the Department for Trade and Industry, and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

6. The Steering Board first met in September 2002 and agreed to appoint COI Communications as their prime contractor. The first two components of the debate programme were completed by December 2002. These comprised initial desk research and foundation discussion workshops, designed to allow members of the public to frame the issues for debate. These results were used in designing the programme, stimulus content and debate materials to be used during the main phase of the debate.

7. Professor Grant then wrote to Ministers on 5 December 2002, on behalf of the Public Debate Steering Board, asking for additional funding for the debate (copy of letter at Annex E) [Not Printed]. Professor Grant indicated that the initial desk research and foundation discussion workshops had already accounted for £107,000 out of the £250,000 budget. He argued that an increase in resources for the debate would yield big dividends in terms of creating a more broad and credible programme to enable more people to take part, in addition to the "narrow and deep" components of the debate. He attached a detailed breakdown of a possible debate programme, including a number of options, with indicative costs.

8. On receipt of Professor Grant's letter, Defra's Communications Directorate (CD) asked COI to set out the rationale for each component of the proposed programme and to explain in more detail what could be delivered in return for any additional funding. In the light of these discussions with COI, Defra's CD concluded that an increase in the debate budget could be justified, and that doubling the debate budget to £500,000 would be sufficient to achieve the objectives of the debate and would offer the best value-for-money.

9. Despite the budgetary pressures faced by Government, and concern at the major discrepancy between the initial and revised cost estimates, the Secretary of State recommended to colleagues, and sought their agreement, that the debate budget should be doubled, and requested further contributions. She then wrote to Professor Grant on 20 January 2003 offering an additional £155,000 (Annex F) [Not Printed], which comprised additional funding from Defra, DTI and Northern Ireland, and indicated that she was still trying to establish with colleagues whether some further funding could be made available.

10. Discussions then continued with the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales with a view to securing additional contributions from them. They had concerns about the scope and timing of the debate and were unwilling to confirm additional contributions until these had been resolved. They were concerned

in particular that the debate should be postponed until the first set of results from the Farm Scale Evaluations had been published, and were also concerned about the timing of the debate in relation to their national elections.

11. In the light of the concerns of the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales and the associated uncertainty regarding additional funding, Professor Grant wrote to the Secretary of State again on 30 January (copy of letter at Annex G) [Not Printed] 2003 requesting that the timetable for the debate be extended so that the main public events would run throughout the UK in May, June and July. The Steering Board would then submit their report to Ministers in September, rather than June as originally agreed. The Secretary of State replied on 18 February 2003 (copy of letter at Annex H) [Not Printed] agreeing to the proposed extension and confirming a doubling of the debate budget to £500,000. She also indicated that Defra would cover the cost of COI's management fee (approximately £50,000).

Financial procedures

12. Funds for the public debate were deposited into a central "holding account" managed by Defra. Although the Steering Board was responsible for allocating the debate budget, payments were made by Defra to COI from this central account. Funds could only be released from this account after:

- the go-ahead for work was given by the Steering Board
- a cost estimate had been approved and signed by a nominated official from Defra's Communications Directorate
- an invoice had been approved and signed by a nominated official from Defra's Communications Directorate.

PUBLICISING THE DEBATE

13. The independent Steering Board and COI were responsible for publicising the debate, though Defra provided support where possible. The Steering Board was responsible for deciding how to use the debate budget most cost-effectively. Given the high cost of advertising, the Steering Board took the view that it would be more cost-effective to engage the media to publicise the debate. The Steering Board's Communications Adviser met regularly with COI and Defra officials to share information and coordinate activity, with a view to maximising publicity.

14. Defra provided additional support to the Steering Board by:

- issuing press notices on behalf of the Steering Board;
- publishing information about the debate on Defra's website;
- providing contacts through the Government News Network (GNN) in order to publicise the debate more widely;
- seconding a Defra official to COI for a period of six weeks in May/June 2003, in order to provide administrative support during the busiest period;
- funding a GNN regional press officer to support the Steering Board's Communications Adviser with day-to-day duties.

15. At the request of the Steering Board, Defra Ministers also agreed to promote the debate through speeches at appropriate events. The first of these was given by Michael Meacher at the Gene Futures Conference "Debating the use of GM Crops and Foods in the UK" on 11 February. The Secretary of State also gave the keynote speech at a Green Alliance event at the Royal Society on 5 June. Copies of the speeches can be found at www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches.

September 2003

Annex C

Chronology of Public Debate

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|---------------|--|
| 10 Sept 2001 | AEBC report "Crops on Trial" recommends a broader public debate on GM |
| 17 Jan 2002 | UK Government responds to the AEBC's report and asks for further advice on how and when to promote an effective public debate |
| 26 April 2002 | AEBC provides further advice |
| 31 May 2002 | A Defra news release confirms that there will be a full and informed public debate and also announces two further strands of activity |
| 8 July 2002 | COI provides advice and preliminary cost estimates |
| 26 July 2002 | A Defra news release confirms a "GM dialogue" comprising the three strands and announces that the budget for the debate will be £250,000 |
| 9 Sept 2002 | Composition of Steering Board announced |
| 5 Dec 2002 | Professor Grant writes to Ministers requesting additional funding for the debate |

| | |
|----------------|---|
| 20 Jan 2003 | Secretary of State writes to Professor Grant confirming £155k extra funding |
| 30 Jan 2003 | Professor Grant writes to Ministers requesting extension of debate timetable |
| 11 Feb 2003 | Michael Meacher's speech at Gene Futures conference, programme and wider GM dialogue |
| 18 Feb 2003 | Secretary of State writes to Professor Grant agreeing to extension to timetable and confirming total budget of £500k |
| 26 Feb 2003 | Steering Board issues press release publicising debate |
| 13 May 2003 | Press notice announcing dates and location of regional launch events and details of how to get involved |
| 3 June 2003 | Media launch by Professor Grant in London, and press notice announcing start of debate. First regional launch event in Birmingham |
| 5 June 2003 | Secretary of State speech at Green Alliance/Royal Society event. |
| 5–13 June 2003 | Further regional launch events held in Swansea, Taunton, Belfast, Glasgow and Harrogate |
| 30 June 2003 | "GM Nation?" press notice "still time to get involved" |
| 18 July 2003 | Deadline for return of "GM Nation?" feedback forms |
| Sept 2003 | Public Debate Steering Board due to report to Government |

Witnesses: **Mr Elliot Morley**, a Member of the House, Minister for Environment and Agri-environment, and **Mr Lucian Hudson**, Director of Communications, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, examined.

Q59 Chairman: Minister, thank you for coming to give evidence. As I said to Professor Grant, we are investigating the process of the public consultation, we are not looking at the substance of GM issues. Professor Grant said in a nutshell that basically because of the time constraints and the money constraints he was finding the opinions of the informed public, or A, Bs, or in political jargon of the political junkies, not the big brothers, for those who attended the same Hansard Society seminar. He said, without bending his words, that he felt they had not really consulted the public, they had consulted a particularly well informed part of the public which was engaged in this issue. Do you think that is a fair evaluation?

Mr Morley: I think that probably is a fair evaluation. Can I just introduce Mr Lucian Hudson.

Q60 Chairman: Who was, in fact, a member of the Steering Board.

Mr Morley: He was a member of the Steering Board and he is also Defra's Director of Communications. I think that is a fair comment, Chairman. Reading through their report they did give an analysis of the kind of people who went who were very highly motivated, who did have very strong views on the issue of GM, who generally attended the main public meetings. I suspect that at the very many smaller meetings that were organised as spin-offs, some of those may have had a bit of a broader membership in relation to that. I think also the fact that the whole debate started did generate discussion and debate within the newspapers, within the media, less so in the popular press, although it did reverberate into popular programmes like *The Archers*, Chairman, as you know, and of course it got to a lot more people and made them aware of the debate that was going on. I think that comment is fair but I think it might have had a wider audience in terms of the effects of the debate.

Q61 Chairman: This is a consultation to find out what people think and there will be some questions later about the timing of it in relation to the other

strands of the consultation. The demand inevitably comes, "If we have been consulted we expect the Government to do what we have said and to act upon what we have said". These are complex matters in which Government has no choice really but to rest upon the science. What happens if the public and the scientists are pointing in different directions on this sort of issue?

Mr Morley: Under the terms of reference of this debate, it was against the background of the potential commercialisation of GM crops and Margaret Beckett, the Secretary of State, said at the beginning that it was not meant to be a referendum on GM, it was meant to give people the opportunity to discuss the issues, examine the arguments, to be aware of the issues surrounding which are, as you quite rightly say, Chairman, quite complex. I think that the reaction that we need to have as a Government is that first of all we must take account of the findings of the debate, we cannot ignore the views of the people that were expressed. There were a range of views. The "narrow but deep" analysis was really very interesting in the report and that perhaps gave a bit of a broader perspective in relation to public opinion. It is helpful to the Government to engage in public opinion. It was never meant to be a definitive view or a referendum.

Q62 Chairman: So, in other words, the public does not have a veto on this?

Mr Morley: I think it is difficult to give the public a veto on a complex issue of this kind. The public have a veto in the sense that if the public do not buy GM produce then you could argue there is a veto in relation to public choice. I think the issue is to be open and transparent in the process, to approach the whole issue of GM on a science-based approach, what the Government has been trying to do. I really do not think there is another country, certainly in Europe, that has put in place a range of studies in the way this Government has to examine the issue in such detail and to put it in the public domain and make it available in the way that this Government has done.

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Q63 Mr Wiggin: I am glad to hear the Minister is keen on being open and transparent. The Five Year Freeze campaign's director, who was also a member of the PDSB, and I am sure Mr Hudson will confirm this, has told the Committee that "contrary to the current views of the Secretary of State, the PDSB was given no opportunity to explore other possible contractors and was advised that the constraints on time and budget and Government tendering procedures necessitated the appointment of COI", the Central Office of Information. Why was the Steering Board advised that COI should be appointed as prime contractor?

Mr Morley: There were constraints on time in particular. Do you want to comment on that, Lucian?

Mr Hudson: The long and the short of it is had there been more time clearly it would have been better just to have an open tender with anyone coming forward as the prime contractor. COI too would have benefited from that, had they been chosen. Because of the time constraints the advantage for the Steering Board of going for the COI—it was the Steering Board that obviously went in that direction—was that the COI does have a roster of events companies and strategic consultancies, and those number about 60. As you know, under the EU regulations it is quite a tough process to get a Government contract. What the COI roster allows is a whole group of companies you can call on from the private sector who still have to go through a tendering process but it is not as long or as difficult as the full EU regulatory process requires. The COI is a quick way in which you can engage someone quickly to do what you need. At the time that the Steering Board had to take a decision about how to get things going, the COI was in a position to help achieve that. The time constraints were quite considerable and, therefore, COI provided that sort of flexibility.

Q64 Mr Wiggin: What experience did COI have of undertaking large-scale public consultation exercise?

Mr Hudson: I think this was new to COI, it was new to all of us.

Q65 Mr Wiggin: Was it up to the demands placed upon it?

Mr Morley: You have to bear in mind that I am pretty sure when I say that I do not think an exercise of this scale or type has ever been attempted by government before. Obviously there have been referendum campaigns, but that is a different issue. In terms of a large-scale public debate of this kind, I do not think there is any experience of it so I think it is fair to say it was a learning experience for all concerned.

Q66 Mr Wiggin: Lastly, why did Defra officials apparently meet regularly with COI during the preparations for the debate? Can you see why such meetings would raise questions about the degree to which the debate was conducted at arm's length from the Government?

Mr Morley: I think it is inevitable that there were meetings because there were negotiations in relation to funding, particularly where the Steering Board and AEBC would want to talk to the Government about issues of that type. We were very careful, as a Government, to ensure that the debate was conducted at arm's length from Government, that it was Professor Grant and his Board who were the ones who ran the debate and made the decisions and the Government kept very much in the background. I think you will find that the Board have no criticisms of the Government in relation to any attempt at interference. I will pass you over to Lucian.

Mr Hudson: The Secretary of State, Margaret Beckett, was very clear that she wanted to hold the debate and wanted to hold it at arm's length. We followed that to the letter. We needed to ensure, however, that what public money was spent was spent the best way, so I needed to keep tabs on the progress of the debate and how the money was spent, and also ask questions about how the money was spent. That was one thing. The other thing was Malcolm Grant, as the Chairman, wanted me to help in any way I could to make sure that we made available to the Steering Board any of the networks that Government has to support the Steering Board. We decided early on with Malcolm that we would set up a co-ordinating group, a communications contact group, which would have on it Malcolm Grant's press officer, initially myself, and then after a member of my team, and anyone who could help facilitate the Steering Board in terms of what it needed to do and chase progress. It was very clear that was not a decision-making body, any decisions would be referred to Malcolm Grant or the secretary of the Steering Board or the Steering Board, it was just there to facilitate.

Q67 Mr Wiggin: Earlier you said you were keeping tabs on the money being spent and reporting back to the Secretary of State, but that is not really arm's length, is it?

Mr Morley: That is normal accountability of public money, as simple as that. Just making sure that they were not going on holiday to Spain.

Q68 Chairman: You said it was a shortage of time, the time constraint required the appointment of COI, but the time constraint was imposed by the Government so it is a slightly tautologous argument, is it not?

Mr Morley: To a point. Again, I come back to the point that this is a new venture, new experience. It is fair to say that there was slippage from the announcement of the Secretary of State that the Government was minded to respond favourably to the original recommendation from AEBC for a debate of this kind to the setting up of the debate. It did slip back into the autumn. There were a number of reasons why there was time pressure, it was not simply that the Government restricted the time.

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Q69 Alan Simpson: Minister, there are real concerns about the extent to which the COI was just bounced in as the only choice that was offered as the vehicle for doing this which casts doubt over the claims about arm's length from the Government. Can I come back to one specific point. I can understand all the points that yourself and Mr Hudson have made about the Government making itself available to the Board in order to make sure that the process of consultation worked, but why were there separate meetings between Defra and COI?

Mr Morley: I will come back to that other point. Perhaps you would like to mention that, Lucian. We have already said that in relation to the COI there were time constraints. The COI is an umbrella organisation that brings in agencies that are professional media and press agencies and in terms of getting things up and running as quickly as possible the COI is really an appropriate choice to make. Many of those agencies have nothing to do with the Government. COI is notionally a Government body but it is more like an agency than a structure in itself. There was a logic in using COI. Do you want to refer to the other point, Lucian?

Mr Hudson: I cannot think of a meeting that Defra just had with COI. I can only think of meetings at which the Steering Board was represented by its press officer and where we, as a group, kept one another informed about what was happening where. Not surprisingly, there was an awful lot to do and a lot of progress to chase. Also, given that people were arguing that there was a limited pot of money, the issue as well as the money was what else could we do that would allow us to get the coverage that we would like for the debate. That meant exploiting what networks there were to get the profile for the Steering Board. I was clear all along that we were only promoting the debate and nothing else. Insofar as there was contact, it was to facilitate the Steering Board.

Q70 Alan Simpson: I am clear about the value of the Government link with the Steering Board but my understanding, however, is that it is not true that there were no meetings just between Defra and the COI. If you are saying that is not the case I would like an assurance here that if we can provide you with further information about meetings, you will come back with a written explanation to the Committee about the specific purpose of those meetings. You were shaking your head about to say no but my understanding is in definitive terms the answer is yes, those meetings did take place and, as such, the Committee needs to have an explanation about the rationale behind those meetings and the outcomes from them because that is not then supporting the work of the Board or going through the Board. If you do not know, if we give you the information can we have an assurance now that we will have a written explanation?

Mr Hudson: I am sure people were trying to nail down what was happening when, what money was being spent on, and that was needed. I cannot think of anything that was of a decision-making nature where Defra and COI were bypassing the Steering

Board, this is the critical point. I cannot think of such a decision. If you say to me there is a suspicion or a thought that there could be, I would like to know what that is and I would be very happy to respond to that more fully.

Mr Morley: I have not heard any allegation whatsoever that there was any attempt by the Government to manipulate the shape of the debates or the decisions of the Board. As we have said, if you have specific examples that you would like explained that you feel you have we are very happy to look at that and give you an answer.

Q71 Mr Drew: If we can go on to the timing of the debate. Everyone accepts that it was very short and obviously you were in with Professor Grant who made it quite clear that he would never contemplate again undertaking such an enterprise on the basis of the time. Can I concentrate on the issue of when it was held as well as the duration. Clearly there were a lot of conspiracy theories out there which saw the Government trying to get this in before the scientific evidence and the field trials were announced. I did hold a meeting in Stroud, and I referred to this in the previous session—it is one of those issues where everyone has an opinion—in an audience of about 90 people there were about two or three who did not really have an absolutely clear opinion. If we had had the evidence before of the field trials and the scientific evidence that might have allowed more of a genuine debate to take place rather than one of pre-rehearsed positions? I just wondered if you had a position on that?

Mr Morley: I think it might have, Chairman, but it is worth bearing in mind, of course, that the Farm Scale Evaluations are on a comparatively narrow set of principles. The actual debate on the whole issue of GM foods, GM crops, etc involves a much wider debate than actually the FSEs. It is also worth bearing in mind, of course, that the whole process actually started way, way in advance of the expected end results of FSEs. The whole process did slip, it is true. It was a longer and more complex process, I think, than was estimated, I will be quite honest about that. I come back to the point that an exercise of this type has not been attempted before in this country. I make no apology for that, I think it was the right thing to do. I think it was a useful exercise. I think it was a qualified success. I think the Government should have some credit for supporting it and backing it and financing it but of course there are issues to learn. It did slip, it did go on longer. There was a request, as you know, Chairman, for an extension of the debate. That extension was given and of course that took the debate closer to the results of the FSEs than was expected originally. I think that is the explanation for that, the timings came out of sync.

Q72 Mr Drew: The reason, in a sense, although you know my position on GM, I felt a bit sorry for the scientist—and to be fair a scientist came along and tried to explain the science of GM in a quarter of an hour, I have to say he did not help—I think he would have been in a far stronger position if he had been

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able to talk to something current and explain what he saw coming out of the Farm Scale Trials and the wider scientific debate rather than explain why he is in favour of GM which with the best will in the world just did not go at all with an audience which had largely made its mind up. In fact, apart from the people he had brought with him it was quite hard work to see how he could have won people over.

Mr Morley: The debate was not really set up to win people over on either side of the argument. It was an opportunity for people to explore the issues, to give their opinions, to ask questions and try and get some answers to questions. That was the intention, it was not an attempt to convince people on either side of the argument, it was an opportunity for people to explore the issues.

Q73 Mr Drew: That is the problem with the notion of the term GM debate.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q74 Mr Drew: They want a debate. There were a series of pre-rehearsed positions where we know the overwhelming line of opinion rests that people, for whatever reason, are against GM. That was reflected at a meeting I held, it was reflected, presumably, in all the other meetings.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q75 Mr Drew: Maybe the word debate was perhaps a bit of a misnomer?

Mr Morley: Perhaps you are right but nevertheless it was a strand of public opinion which, of course, it is important for the Government to recognise.

Mr Hudson: This was an issue all the time for the Steering Board about how you get beyond for and against and how you do what you set out to do which was to get the public to frame the issues on GM issues—plural—including, of course, commercialisation of crops. Reading the findings of the report, and particularly paragraph 41, I think that sets out quite clearly the debate. Obviously it can be polarised, we know that, but also there are a range of views “. . . ranging from an outright and definite ban . . .” as it says in paragraph 41 “. . . to (more frequently) a period of delay to allow more information to be gathered about GM crops and their effects, and for tighter regulatory conditions to be imposed.” So even though that paragraph talks about people’s suspicions and outright hostility more people are in that camp than supportive. I think if you are looking for the format of the public meetings and the workshops they were quite innovative in terms of what they call deliberative techniques, a word which I picked up working with my colleagues on the public debate Steering Board. I think it went beyond just holding a meeting for and against for those meetings that were overseen by the GM public debate Steering Board.

Q76 Diana Organ: On the timing of the debate, as the Chairman has already said, you have said, Minister, that there were constraints on timing and that was why the COI had to be appointed but that is a nonsense, is it not, because the Government was

the organisation which was choosing the timing of this debate. Who made the decision that this debate would go ahead of the outcome of the scientific trials?

Mr Morley: If you remember the recommendation came at the beginning of 2002. The recommendation that the debate should go ahead was made in May 2002 by the Secretary of State.

Q77 Diana Organ: So the Secretary of State made the decision to go ahead before the outcome of the trials?

Mr Morley: Bearing in mind that this discussion was going on, these recommendations had been received at the beginning of 2002. As we know the results of the trials were not due until autumn 2003, that was a very long way away from the beginning of 2002.

Q78 Diana Organ: You say there was slippage so the debate was meant to start and end by the end of June, then there were difficulties so it slipped. Did you have representations from all sorts of individuals which might have said if you run this debate through the summer people are on holiday, people are away, students are not at universities—as we have been talking about earlier—it is difficult. It is hot sunny nights and people do not necessarily want to engage in a debate on a hot summer’s night. As there was slippage already why did we not wait and hold this debate running September into the end of October?

Mr Morley: You could argue that cold wet nights do not get people out as well as hot sunny nights. I do not think there is an ideal time. I think there are pros and cons in whatever time you have a debate of this kind. The simple answer is that the recommendation came at the beginning of 2002. The Government accepted the recommendation and took steps to set the debate up as quickly as possible but it did take longer than expected, I think that is the truth.

Q79 Diana Organ: Okay. The duration of the debate was deemed to be short by virtually everybody who took a part in it. How much was taken on board that you had talked about before hand that it would need to be a period where it could come together? Three months has been thrown around, who made the decision and why that it would only go for the six months?

Mr Hudson: I think all the questions you asked are the right ones. The Steering Board obviously took a view that it wanted to deliver on the budget and to the timetable. The slippage was that we all wanted to have a debate kick off early in the year and not as late as it happened. Indeed there was further slippage before we could even have it in May. There was an issue around the purdah period and devolved administrations. Having said that, one always recognised the debate would not be interminable. This debate was adding value to a debate already out there so the secret was how to have maximum impact over a period of time and that was never going to be that long, especially with the money available. It was the Steering Board that took these views and it took

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a view when it was ready to go. All we had to be assured of was that the money was spent the right way.

Q80 Diana Organ: On the last bit of timing, have you decided the timing of when the Government will respond to the consultation on the debate? There is a timetable set out for when you are going to have it so when are you hoping the Government is going to make its response to this consultation?

Mr Hudson: We are going to respond.

Q81 Diana Organ: When?

Mr Hudson: We are working out just when that is. As you know there are a number of things which are being taken into account at the moment but we will. Of course we have to respond, we know that.

Q82 Diana Organ: It seems as though ahead of time you had very careful thought about the timing of when you would hold the debate but you have not slotted into it the end of the whole process which is the response of Government, is that right?

Mr Morley: The response would have to be a detailed response and, of course, that will take a bit of time in terms of giving the conclusions of the report the consideration which it deserves. It was a good report with a lot of points in and of course we want to respond to that as a Government, it is not always easy to give an exact date to that.

Q83 Diana Organ: The Clerk has informed me that the Government has intimated that you would make a response like you do to Select Committee reports which is two months.

Mr Morley: That is correct, on average.

Q84 Diana Organ: We can look forward to a response from Government two months from the end of the debate?

Mr Morley: As a general principle, yes.

Q85 Chairman: Minister, what is Government best practice for public consultation, the length of which public consultations are open?

Mr Morley: I think it is three months in terms of the consultation on Government Bills and issues. I think that is right.

Q86 Chairman: So it is twice the length of this consultation?

Mr Morley: It is a different process, of course, Chairman, as you will know.

Q87 Chairman: Different process, I was just establishing that.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q88 Alan Simpson: Were you happy with the way the debate went?

Mr Morley: I think, as I mentioned earlier on, it was a qualified success. I think it was successful in terms of raising the issue. It was successful in terms of getting a discussion going on the issues surrounding GM, GM science, GM crops, GM foods. It did

provoke, as you will be aware, debates in Parliament. Many, many questions in Parliament, adjournment debates in Parliament. Huge numbers of letters. Over two million hits on our website as part of the process. Very large numbers, thousands and thousands of questionnaires which were sent in. A very large number of smaller debates, was it 600?

Mr Hudson: 600 public meetings.

Mr Morley: 600 public meetings as a spin off, more probably, as a spin off from the set piece debates. I think in a sense that can be regarded as successful. There were issues of timing, as we have been discussing. There are issues of making people aware and publicity, there are issues there that we need to learn from which perhaps in retrospect could have been done better. I would not want to say to you that there are things which with hindsight we could not have done in different ways and also we have learnt an awful lot of lessons from this exercise. I come back to the point that it had not been attempted before by Government and I think it was an exercise which was worth doing and I make no apologies for putting in place. I think the Board did a good job. I think Professor Grant and his team worked very hard and deserve a great deal of credit. I think many people appreciated the opportunity of the debate and that comes out in the report. I think in that sense it is a qualified success.

Q89 Alan Simpson: If it was worth doing, and from what you said it would be worth repeating, how would you with that hindsight just change the way that debate was structured and resourced?

Mr Morley: Perhaps I will ask Lucian to answer with his professional opinion but I think a longer lead in time in relation to preparation would be useful in terms of doing that. The publicity one is a tricky one in many ways. I think more publicity would have been useful but if you are going to pay for that you can spend very, very large sums of money on advertising and maybe not get a very good increase in relation to attendance on that. I guess most people around the table have been involved in organising public meetings at one or another and therefore you know all the issues which are involved in that and of course this is the same but on a much larger scale.

Q90 Alan Simpson: Prior to your evidence, Minister, we had Professor Grant and he was quite robust with the Committee. I think he thought it was an extremely good process but I asked whether he would repeat it and the answer was no, not on the cash terms that it was asked to operate. Now you did not mention in your reply to me the issue about the budget but would you accept Professor Grant's points that if the Government seriously wants the scale of public involvement that we are looking for that the resources have to be commensurate with the expectation?

Mr Morley: I cannot dispute that particular comment, Chairman. Of course there is an issue of resources in relation to how you run these issues. Again we were into some unknowns in relation to what would be an appropriate budget. You will be aware that the budget was doubled as the process

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went along and it became clear the original budget was not adequate. There are some difficult issues which I was touching upon in that the budget for this was around about £500,000, now a lot of additional money may not have increased publicity for it. Now what is difficult to know is whether, say you double that to a million pounds, whether another £500,000 of publicity material would generate more involvement and participation or would simply go into the pockets of agency. There are some unknowns about this but I accept that there is an issue of resources in trying to get the appropriate figure. Do you want to comment on this?

Mr Hudson: Thank you. We have a relationship now, I hope, with this Committee where you see where we have tried to do something where we take a view afterwards whether it was pretty good or not so good but whatever the outcome we learn lessons and we try and improve for next time. There is no doubt in my mind that it was a very difficult process, whichever way you look at it but it was worth doing. Whether we do it exactly this way again is obviously a thing we would want to look into in more detail and we are carrying out, so you know, a review of how it went, what worked well and where we think it needs improving. We are working our way through with other colleagues in Government and the COI and the Steering Board what those lessons might be. I am very clear in my mind that this was new to everybody. Of course it was new to the COI but it was new to everybody and I think we can improve the guidance on public consultations in the light of having done this. Personally I think we want to do more of this kind of thing but quite how I think we need to look at. If you are asking me which ways, I would not want to pre-empt that exercise but I am sure in hindsight we would need to look at the programme and project planning of it and where that fell with the COI as the prime contractor or with the Steering Board. I am clear in mind that we do not have a problem with doing things at arm's length but if you do it at arm's length there is still a requirement to make sure that public money is spent properly. If you work with the Steering Board, with all this talent on it, all that talent is going to have a view and that is going to build in to what decisions are taken and how long they take to make. All that I think we need to look at and be very honest about and take a view about if we were to do it again or do something similar how would that look. I am keen to produce that in the course of the next few months.

Q91 Alan Simpson: To be fair to Professor Grant I think there were two issues which he raised which it would be helpful to get your response to because I think he was pro the process but critical of its shortcomings. Would it be fair to say in your review of that process you would be taking on board Diana's points about the timing of it as to how much harder it was to engage farmers and local communities by holding it over the summer periods so before you get to advertising just the logical point of where in the calendar you were to hold this, this would be a legitimate point of concern about just how much mileage in terms of response would be

raised. Also in doing so, again, you would have to look at the evidence base about the issues that were under contention. I think he was quite robust in saying he thought the contentious issues about the science were reduced to the anodyne and that if you are asking the public to have a debate you ought at least to be open about the areas which are being debated within the science as well as within society.

Mr Morley: Certainly I agree with that last point and I think these are issues that we need to examine. I do not disagree with the time of year. I think there are pros and cons of whatever time of year but I think that is something we should look at. I understand that the University of East Anglia carried out a study of the process. I am not quite clear whether they went into things like timing but I am sure their report might address one or two of these issues really and that will help guide future debates of this kind or future events of this kind in terms of the kind of actions we can take.

Q92 Alan Simpson: Finally, you said in your opening comments, Minister, that this was a debate and not a referendum.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q93 Alan Simpson: When Professor Grant was asked about this and its implications he made a point to the Committee which I think is extremely important namely that we ought to take credit for the fact that this is the most imaginative and engaging programme of consultation that any government anywhere has embarked upon. He did stress that it had a consequence and the consequence was about public trust, that as the Government invites the public to engage in a public debate it puts itself on line and will be judged in respect of what it does with the outcomes of that debate. Do you accept Professor Grant's view that that is beyond the issue itself, that there is an issue of trust about what the Government does with the process?

Mr Morley: I absolutely accept there is an issue of trust and there is an issue in relation to the process. I come back to the point that the Secretary of State made it very clear from the very beginning that it would not be a referendum, it could not be a referendum because by its very nature it is not constructed in that way. Nevertheless the opinions expressed within the *GM Nation* dialogue, the opinions expressed in the report are very important and I think that we do have a responsibility as a Government to take them into account, bearing in mind that it is not a veto but nevertheless it does influence the consideration of the issues that we have to make as a Government.

Q94 Mr Drew: I just wondered in terms of the balance of evidence and the balance of reflection from the evidence how much note you will generally take of people who did organise their own conferences given that there was only a small number of formally organised meetings and many people could not get to those and if they had got to them you would have had a real problem because as Alan said they could not get in anyway to some of

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them. I just wonder because in a sense we have established the debate was probably long term but the people who made the effort to say we want to be part of the process can they be assured that their views will be listened to, even though they came from a fairly pre-rehearsed position?

Mr Morley: Absolutely. Even where you get very polarised views, I think it is important to try and understand why people take that position. It is important to understand people's concerns. I think it is important to understand why it is in some cases there is an issue of trust, an issue of trust in government, an issue of trust in big business, an issue of trust in biotechnology companies. All these elements came out in the event and that was why I think we were keen to have it. One point I did not make is one of the reasons for the timing was we were anticipating we might be called to make some decisions on GM commercialisation as early as October to the EU process, now as it happens all those have slipped as well. We were quite keen to have the opinions of people and to have the results of this "GM Nation?" event before that process. Now as it happens they have fallen back, in the same way as the actual dialogue slipped the decision making process has slipped as well.

Q95 Mr Mitchell: Professor Grant thought that the Government did not do enough in the shape of ministers publicising and promoting the debate, why was that?

Mr Morley: I think my predecessor, Michael Meacher, did make a number of key speeches at a number of events timed, actually, with the start of "GM Nation?", quite deliberately so. Margaret Beckett made a key speech on GMs at the Royal Society and was it at the Oxford Farming Conference as well? There was another major venue that she also made a key note speech at.

Mr Hudson: The Royal Society.

Mr Morley: Yes, the Royal Society, again as part of the actual process. Defra tried to publicise the events regionally by putting out press notices and press releases through our Defra press network to try and raise the issue and make people aware of what was going on and give some publicity to the events as well. In parallel we did attempt to raise the issue through ministerial activity.

Q96 Mr Mitchell: That was one speech from each.

Mr Morley: I think it was a bit more than that.

Q97 Mr Mitchell: The Committee did ask for public pronouncement, was that really enough, the speeches I mean?

Mr Morley: There was more than one speech each, there were a number of key speeches. Also, I come back to the point I was making, when the event got under way it sparked off a lot of interest in Parliament as well, it came up regularly at Defra questions. There were a number of Adjournment Debates on the whole issue of GMs and that was all during the period of "GM Nation?" which also added to the attention, the media attention, and to the publicity.

Q98 Mr Mitchell: He also said the Government did not give a lead to the debate. Its position was neither a bold neither for nor again, in fact I got the impression that Churchill's phrase that he has sat on the fence so long that the iron has entered his soul was applicable in the Government's approach. Why was that?

Mr Morley: The simple explanation for that was that the decision was taken that the "GM Nation?" event would be arm's length from Government and therefore the Government took care not to get involved in that particular process but to leave it to the Board. In that respect it was a deliberate policy to be seen not to be interfering or manipulating.

Q99 Mr Mitchell: I was disappointed with Alan's question when he said would you listen because we are of course a listening Government. I do wonder how you are going to respond to the debate without taking a view?

Mr Morley: The Secretary of State has given a commitment that the Government will make a detailed response to this debate and that will be done.

Q100 Mr Mitchell: Your response will take a view on GM?

Mr Morley: The response will certainly cover the points which were raised. The Government does have a view on GM and the Government's view on GM is that the case for GM must be examined on a scientific basis and that the arguments for and against must be examined.

Q101 Mr Mitchell: It is a bit like the euro?

Mr Morley: The euro is very clear. We all know exactly where we are on the euro. As far as GM is concerned, it is important to examine the claimed potential benefits of GM. The Government has put what I would argue is probably the most sophisticated processes in place to do just that in terms of its scientific review, in terms of its economic review from the Number 10 Strategy Unit and in terms of its FSEs. I might just say on that point, Chairman, I do find it very surprising that because the Government, not unreasonably in my view, is prepared to look at the arguments for and against and not to automatically rule out new technology, it is presented as some kind of rabid enthusiast for GMs. I think that is the responsible position to take. I do believe that we should be cautious about new technology but, nevertheless, I believe that we should give it a fair hearing and we should respond, also, to people's legitimate concerns about it and that is what we are doing in the processes that we are putting in place.

Q102 Mr Mitchell: I have no argument with that. I agree with the point, certainly, that Professor Grant made about the value of the debate, I thought that was an impressive point, but it puts you in a very difficult situation when it comes to making a decision because so far as I can see the consumer does not want GM, there is a pressure group campaign against GM, the outcome of the

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consultation was the majority—the overwhelming majority I think, it was about five to one at the meetings and eight to two at the general consultation—does not want GM. That makes it very difficult for the Government to take the position if the scientists are saying GM is okay.

Mr Morley: That raises two issues which are a bit wider in the debate. The two issues are first of all the Government has a responsibility to ensure any new technology of this kind is safe and does not have a detrimental impact on the environment, those are the processes we have in place. With the bodies that we have like the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, the Pesticide Safety Directive, the National Seed Listing, the Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes we have a very sophisticated process to do that.

Q103 Mr Mitchell: Whatever the consultation says you are not going to use it?

Mr Morley: That is a second issue. Our responsibility in the process is to examine the consequences of this new technology. In relation to whether people buy it or not, that is an issue of consumer choice. We have another responsibility on that, to ensure labelling, flexibility and regulation so people really do have that choice, that is very important. In the end if people do not want to buy it, if people do not want to grow it, then it is not likely there will be a market. That is a matter for the market in that sense. Our responsibility is one of regulation and control.

Mr Mitchell: It is a market and service matter, is it not? We had a perfectly innocuous Zeneca tomato puree which was actually cheaper and tasted better than tomato puree and in the panic it disappeared and I have been trying for months now to get that tomato puree just to defy people.

Q104 Chairman: We will see if there are any stocks left over.

Mr Morley: I guess it lasts a very long time, Chairman.

Mr Drew: I cannot wait for the fish paste.

Q105 Paddy Tipping: I was tempted after the euro comment, Elliot, to ask you what the five economic tests were.

Mr Morley: I have no idea. I am glad you did not.

Q106 Paddy Tipping: I think this has been an important process and, as Lucian told us, it is a process to be learnt from, not just from the Department but across Government.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q107 Paddy Tipping: You are as a Department consulting, a long consultation, on the disposal of nuclear waste.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q108 Paddy Tipping: What has this exercise told you that will help that nuclear waste process?

Mr Morley: That is a very interesting question, Chairman. You do not necessarily have to have a consultation of this type and this scale in relation to every single issue. Disposal of nuclear waste is certainly an important issue. You are quite right to say we are embarking on a public consultation on this.

Mr Hudson: Could I chip in? We are developing some thinking here. What I would say is quite interesting from my perspective, having been exposed to the arguments on the Steering Board and then discussed them within the Department, is there is certainly an issue around information for people is not enough. You can give people more and more information and that does not convince. I think if you can look at any contentious area, I am aware, much more so than I was a year ago, that it is not just a matter of giving people information, there are other things which count for people as well: the trust in institutions, the trust in the processes. I cannot really comment on what it means for radioactive, even though that is obviously something the Department has got to do. I would be surprised out of all this process we have not formed a view, of course you are going to get engagements, of course you are going to get people with a lot of heat, if you are going to get light, how are you going to get that light and how are you going to get people to look at the issues who are not just those who are following the issue most closely. Now in all of that I think there will be lessons and thinking, all right, if we are to avoid falling into this or that trap what are the mechanisms to ensure you reach more people, that you take into account not just information but people's strongly held views, some of which will not be necessarily well founded but nonetheless you will want to listen to. On the other hand, you do not want a Government sidetracked by opening up the gates to views which do not have any foundation at all. That is the trickiness of it and I think that will be taken into account in whatever we do by way of any consultation.

Q109 Paddy Tipping: One of the conclusions of the report is the distrust of politicians which may be well founded and the distrust of science. There is a big issue there for Government as a whole about how you put scientific material across in a way which is not perceived as coming from mad men in white coats, as it were.

Mr Morley: You are absolutely right and, of course, that issue has not been far from the back of our minds in this debate on GM. It goes back to BSE and the kind of problems when people were given assurances which turned out to be not right. Some of the science at the time was proved to be inaccurate. Now this does not help public confidence, it does not help public confidence either in science or Government structures. We have tried to address that by putting in place independent bodies: the Food Standards Agency, for example, in relation to food safety, the bodies I have mentioned, such as ACRE, even the nuclear waste board, CORWM, which is a new body we have put in place, these are all independent bodies. We are trying, also, to be

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much more open and transparent in the processes than existed in the past. I really do think we have moved a long way in relation to Government processes, consultation processes, the fact that we put everything in the public domain these days in a way which certainly it was not in the past. I think that is trying to address the issue of trust and confidence. It is not easy, we know that very well, but I think the answer has to be independent bodies which are not necessarily Government bodies and also an open and transparent process so that people can see how the decision making process has been put in place and working along every stage of the decision making process.

Q110 Patrick Hall: Minister, the Government's comments on GM, and certainly the Prime Minister repeatedly over some years, have emphasised that any decision made by the Government will be based on the science.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q111 Patrick Hall: Professor Grant's evidence earlier and also the contents of this document shows the public's contribution through this exercise has not centred solely on science at all but has taken on a number of other issues. He mentioned the ownership of technology, there is consumer information, labelling, you mentioned, Minister, consumer choice, trust in biotech companies and Government and also the impact on developing countries. Those are legitimate concerns the public hold.

Mr Morley: Yes.

Q112 Patrick Hall: Given the prior emphasis on the decision being based on science that the Government has made does that mean that those other legitimate issues will not influence the Government's decision or will the Government be able to take on those other issues alongside science, as has been raised by the public?

Mr Morley: The answer is some of them. Some of them go beyond the duties and responsibilities of Government. There are arguments about lock-in, for example, in relation to chemical use and whether that is desirable. These are decisions for farmers about whether they want to have that lock-in in relation to the kind of crops they use. There is certainly an issue in relation to developing countries which overflows into world trade positions, positions of information, the globalisation of GMs, the fact that whatever happens in our own country we are having a debate about what we are doing in our own country but GMs are a reality globally. In that sense you need structures to ensure that seeds that we import are not GM seeds, if we are importing conventional seeds we have to have those kinds of controls in place, some of these stem from the kinds of concerns that people have and the discussions that they have. Also, I think, it reinforces in my mind the bottom line that GMs are a reality globally. People have been debating the issue around them on all these points which you quite rightly refer to. These are choices in the end for individuals as well about

whether they want to buy and eat GM products. I think one of the most important things that we have to do as a Government in response to that concern is to make sure people do have that choice so they do not have to if they do not want to. They can make the choice. Austin can buy his GM puree if he really wants to do that but if people do not want to buy GM products then we need to ensure they do not have to.

Q113 Alan Simpson: Paddy mentioned the five tests, actually I think that is a serious point which I wanted to come back to. One of the things which has come out of this whole consultation process, specifically from the science report and the Farm Scale Evaluations, is that they have raised really important questions about science and uncertainty. We are having to move into a new approach to the regimes about risk assessment. Can I just ask for an assurance from you that in the response you are working up one of the areas that is going to be pro science is a willingness on the part of the Government to fund research precisely into the areas of doubt and risk that the debate was not able to reach. I am just anxious that Professor Grant acknowledged that in the nature of that debate we had no meaningful debate about the risks in relation to the horizontal gene transfer, about the impact of growth promoters on cell functions, on the use of antibiotic marker resistance. There have been no national or international studies of any significance about allergenicity. We now know there are big implications about the environmental impact. Will the Government be coming back with assurances that we will take a proactive line in funding that research which needs to take place before the next stage of the debate?

Mr Morley: That is a very reasonable point and already I think that we are looking at the results of the FSEs, for example. One thing which struck me very much, Chairman, in the results of the FSEs is the variation from conventional crops in relation to the biodiversity. There are some important lessons for us to learn in relation to management and application in relation to conventional farming. It is worth saying that we are concentrating on GMs but conventional farming is not without its problems and we should not forget that. I think this whole debate, the whole science programme that we have had in place—and we have looked at issues such as pollen spread and there have been studies on gene transfer in various ways—does throw up a range of issues which do require further research and do require further work. We do have independent advisory panels which advise the Department in relation to areas of research that we shall be looking at and, of course, people like Professor Pollock, who is the chair of ACRE, I am sure he will have some views in relation to the FSEs when they have had a chance to look at that. I am sure those are issues which would require following up in terms of research programmes which we will have to direct some of our research budget to. I am sure that is inevitable.

22 October 2003 Mr Elliot Morley MP and Mr Lucian Hudson

Q114 Chairman: Minister, that is a good note on which to conclude. I have never been sure whether consultations liberate or imprison governments, and I am still not sure but that might be a subject for debate, no doubt, in a different committee. Thank

you very much indeed and no doubt we will see you again in the normal course of events. There is a long way for this particular saga still to go.

Mr Morley: There is, Chairman. Thank you very much.

Written evidence

Memorandum submitted by Saffron Walden & District Friends of the Earth (A2)

We should like to make comments on the conduct of this debate. In July we, in conjunction with the countryside group of Uttlesford Local Agenda 21, with the full support of Uttlesford District Council, arranged a local public debate. This was set up according to the advice given by the Steering Group appointed by the Government to organise the debate. 67 people attended, more than is usual for any public meeting in this rural area.

1. GENERAL COMMENTS

The GM debate has been characterised by deep divisions over both ethical and scientific issues, with arguments over the validity of many research results that have not yet been settled. We recognise that the Steering Group had a very difficult task in producing agreed material to be debated and ensuring that the debates were fair.

2. GENERAL PUBLICITY

This was not adequate. Statements appeared from time to time in the press that there would be a debate but no official one appeared until after Easter and even then it was not made clear that the debate would finish on 18 July. Better information was provided on the internet but relatively few people use the internet regularly and of those few would visit the Defra website spontaneously. For instance, we have 100 members but only 20 have access to the internet. The same proportions would apply to another local group, Amnesty International. It would probably apply to the general adult population, i.e. those over 18 years old. The problem of alerting the public is difficult if the national media do not voluntarily include press statements in their news items. However, the whole object of the exercise was to engage the public, especially those who had not been involved in the debate and whose views had also been the subject of speculation. It might have been better to consider using a shorter version of the video as an advertisement feature. Reliable information should have been provided by Defra early in 2003 with advance warning of the dates.

3. LOCAL PUBLICITY

Apart from the Regional meetings this was left entirely to those who volunteered to organise meetings, as well as a few local authorities. Again there was good coverage on the internet. We cannot speak for other areas but it requires quite a lot of work to publicise a meeting with press notices, letters to the press, pressure on radio producers, posters and personal invitations to Councillors, Parish Councils, business, biotech companies, schools, farmers, etc, and involves considerable expenditure. Even Local Authorities do not necessarily employ people experienced in public relations and organisations with little money or experience in this field would have had great difficulties. Some advice on this would have been helpful. Lists of meetings could have been centrally advertised in Defra press notices. It would have been better to put more pressure on Local Authorities to set up the debates, requiring them to involve stakeholders from both sides of the argument in setting up the programmes. There could then have been more consistency in the arrangements. Ideally it is something that the Local Agenda 21 groups could have been asked to do but the Government seems to have forgotten about Local Agenda 21 and its purpose. We consider that Defra had the ability to mount an effective press campaign and should have ensured that there was a better strategy for ensuring that people living in all districts had the opportunity to attend a debate.

4. THE INFORMATION MATERIAL

The Steering Group produced a glossy booklet that did contain most of the arguments for and against GM technology, divided up into a number of principal topics, each of which could be debated at a meeting. We found the layout of the sections somewhat confusing especially as the sections were interrupted by whole page pictures not needed to explain the text. It was presumably expensive to produce. We were advised that in our publicity we should ask all those intending to come to the debate to register beforehand and they would be sent a booklet to read beforehand. This involved a heavy postage bill since many more asked for the booklet than actually came. We also reached the conclusion that a lighter version with no interrupting pictures, better layout and costing much less would have been preferable. For the same money more booklets could have been published and also distributed in public libraries etc. available for people to pick up and which could have included an insert giving details of the local debate. Those who turned up at the meeting not having seen the booklet would also have appreciated a simpler layout.

5. THE CONDUCT OF THE DEBATE

Suggestions as to how to hold the debate were supplied and advice was available from the organisers. However, the question of speakers was left entirely to the local organisers. It is very difficult to combine speakers with a real debate as if this is conducted through the setting up of small groups it takes time, especially as they need to report back. The groups also need facilitators who are aware of the arguments. The advice was for the group itself to decide. This, we decided was a mistake as it opened the way for those liable to dominate any proceedings to volunteer. We appointed facilitators beforehand and discussed the issues and the need to be neutral. These warnings should have been made clearly in the advice. It should also have been decided in advance whether speakers were essential. We came to the conclusion that the public wanted to hear experts from both sides and so we provided two speakers, but this did mean a very tight schedule, and it would have been better, to ensure that all debates were similar, for a decision to have been taken on the speaker issue centrally. There is no doubt that many people expected that they would receive more information, but since there is so much differing opinion about the quality of much of the information organisers should have been provided with a list of approved speakers, for and against GM and advised to have one from each side of the argument. We had to “shop around”. There was also no clear direction as to the position of the questionnaire, was it permissible to send it out with the booklet? This could encourage non participation in the debate and responses by those whose views were very strong and not willing to listen to the arguments. The relevant question is of course asked in the questionnaire, “have you attended a meeting?”, but there is no way that this can be checked after the event. We did not issue any questionnaires except to those attending the debate, and time was allotted at the end to complete them. Most were collected up and posted jointly.

6. FINANCIAL SUPPORT

We understood from reports that the money ran out and that the Steering Group did not know for a while as to whether they would receive any more. Whether the second amount was sufficient it is impossible to say without seeing the accounts. We have already commented on the costs of the booklet but our conclusion that more copies of a simpler briefing would not have cost less overall. It would appear that the exercise was not properly costed beforehand, and none of the expenses incurred by local organisers were paid by Defra.

7. OUR CONCLUSIONS

We conclude that, apart from costs, Defra should have played a much bigger part in the initial publicity and that the Steering Group probably had too little time to consider the actual mechanics of the debate itself, as well as the need to ensure that every area was helped to have its own meeting, with appropriate publicity. However, as the first ever exercise in having a debate on a controversial subject the Steering Group deserve praise for what they did achieve. We believe that it was unfortunate that the FSA chose to conduct a separate series of surveys unrelated to the general debate. Judging from the Report it does not seem to have been conducted with the same regard for fairness in presenting all the arguments.

6 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by Joseph Mishan, Co-ordinator Stort Valley Friends of the Earth (A4)

I would like to contribute to the enquiry into the conduct of the GM Nation debate by letting you know of my own experience. I am the co-ordinator of a local Friends of the Earth group based in Hertfordshire.

I phoned the *GM Nation* number one week into the debate and asked for one hundred information/response packs which I was intending to distribute to our membership and to give out at a stall in the Bishops Stortford Carnival day. I was also in the process of organising a public debate but I did not yet have a date for this.

I was told that I could not have packs if I did not have a date for a public debate. When I protested about the very short time allowed for arranging a debate, I was put through to a senior member of staff who told me that the packs were “not for handing out at street corners”, and had to be part of a balanced debate. However, she promised to discuss my request further with her seniors. I was eventually allowed 50 packs.

I am amazed that the packs were not given out more freely, but had conditions attached. My group have recently been part of the Government consultation on airport expansion, and in this case packs were sent out without question. I understand that the GM packs were designed to be part of a formal debate, but given the very restricted time frame there should have been more flexibility on this. I also see no reason why giving them out on street corners was prohibited: I would have thought the street is a venue which is very representative of the population, and a good way to publicise this issue.

(I have finally been able to organise a debate with a local church group, but it is way outside the six weeks of the debate).

The impression I was left with was that the debate had to be run in accordance with Government specifications, just in case the response from the public was not what was wanted. The “balanced debate” idea was I presume an attempt to counteract the well-known public antagonism to GM. However the packs were in themselves quite balanced and would therefore be quite adequate in themselves. Also, as a Friends of the Earth group we are part of the balanced debate: if there are other groups who are pro-GM then they are also part of it. This reflects the debate on airport expansion which is also characterised by pro and anti groups which together make up a balance.

In short I object to the very short time frame of the debate and to the problem I had in obtaining packs which should have been freely available and not provided only under certain conditions.

9 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by GeneWatch UK (A5)

1. Summary:

The public debate was a welcome step in efforts to develop more deliberative and participatory mechanisms in decision making about GM crops. However, there were several problems with the conduct of the debate which hampered the process:

- Initial funding was too little and led to delays as arguments took place about the need for more;
- Government’s intended use of the outcomes of the debate and their importance in decision making was unclear promoting cynicism;
- there was insufficient time for the debate leading to the exclusion of many people;
- not all the relevant information was available to the public—including the science and economics reviews and findings of the farm-scale evaluations;
- the Central Office of Information, who were appointed by the Government to conduct the debate under the direction of the Steering Board, did not appear to be competent to undertake the task;
- the separate exercise conducted by the Food Standards Agency was confusing and led to lost opportunities to integrate methodologies.

However, despite these failings, an important body of information about public attitudes was collected and should be used alongside other data to inform policy and decision making. The government should also conduct an audit of the performance of the COI and reopen the public debate to allow deliberation on the findings of the Science and Economics Reviews and the results of the Farm-Scale Evaluations.

2. GeneWatch UK welcomed the prospect of an active public debate to engage with and inform the policy and decision making process on the future of GM crops and food in the UK so became an active participant in the debate in various ways:

- as an interested observer, collecting views of others participating;
- contributing to the process of preparing public information materials;
- actively trying to engage people in the process through a dedicated section of our web site and producing information materials;
- speaking at public meetings and making GeneWatch’s case against commercialisation at present.

3. At the end of the public debate, GeneWatch undertook a review of the process which has drawn on our own experiences, interviews with stakeholders observing the debate and comments from people who took part in the meetings. This evidence is a summary of the findings of that research and the full report is also being supplied to the Committee in advance of publication. We hope the Committee’s inquiry will consider how any shortcomings in the public debate process should be addressed and draw conclusions which will inform any similar exercises in technology assessment in the future.

4. In July 2002, the Government announced that it would have a broad public debate on the future of GM crops and food in the UK. This was a novel and welcome step that brought the possibility of a new form of public participation in decision making. Planning started in the late summer of 2002 and the debate itself ran for six weeks from June 3rd to July 18th 2003. In parallel, a series of reconvened discussion groups made up of randomly selected people were held. These met on two occasions to discuss the GM issue but were not held in public so are not considered here. The findings of the whole exercise are expected in late September 2003. Inevitably, there will be useful lessons for any future process and this report is intended to aid that learning as well as to evaluate the importance of the debate for GM decision making.

5. Whilst the public debate on the future of GM crops was widely welcomed in principle, there were considerable reservations about how it was conducted in practice. The areas where the public debate was controversial included:

- whether the Government would listen to the outcomes;
- the financial resources committed;
- its timing;

— the quality of the organisation and materials.

6. Even the AEBC expressed reservations at an early stage about the Government's initial plans including that¹:

“The AEBC recognises that the process of the debate will be exceptionally difficult. It has particular concerns about the time scale, and whether the proposed budget is sufficient to allow the independent steering board to do the job properly.”

7. For participants in the debate, it was scepticism about the Government's intentions and their practical experiences of the organisation of the debate that dominated their comments to GeneWatch. All stakeholders shared the uncertainty about how the Government would use the findings of the debate and most emphasised how constraints had led to the exclusion of many people (especially those who had not considered the issues before) and the omission of key pieces of information from the debate—in the shape of the Science and Economics Reviews and the results of the Farm-Scale Evaluations (FSEs). For everyone, the underlying responsibility for these shortcomings was thought to lie with the Government.

8. The Central Office of Information were appointed by the Government to run the debate for the Steering Board, and from the outset the AEBC, among others, was concerned about the independence of COI from Government². During the debate they were frequently criticised for not responding to requests, failing to advertise meetings widely, the poor quality of the information materials, and lack of support in how to host a meeting where discussion could take place productively. The absence of advance publicity about the process led to a lack of broad awareness of the project as the following press report illustrates in relation to the opening meeting in Birmingham: “While those inside the room are eager to get the meeting under way—it is scheduled to start at the helpful time for local working people of 3pm—awareness of the debate outside the building is a little more fuzzy. Just outside the sprawl of the NEC, Nick Skeens, a writer, said he had never heard of the national debate. ‘I have to confess to complete and utter ignorance of it,’ he said”³.

9. Preparing the background materials was one area where GeneWatch had first hand experience of the poor quality work of the COI. GeneWatch was one of the stakeholder groups which was asked to participate in the process of developing the background information—to be presented in booklet and CD-ROM format. However, the COI and the Science Museum (who were contracted to work on the materials) managed to create a situation where no stakeholder, from any perspective, wished to be associated with the final product. The process was begun in the second week of January 2003 and took almost four months to produce and probably cost several thousand pounds. Presenting “views for” and “views against” to a series of questions emerging from the original discussion workshops, it lacked depth and substance. In addition, by presenting the issues in the format that it did, it may well have tended to polarise discussion by constructing two ‘sides’ from the outset. The information booklet also had a bizarre selection of further reading with no discernible rationale. Overall, the production and final content of the information materials gave the impression of incompetence, which left the public debate impoverished and looking rather amateurish.

10. Three tiers of meetings, at regional, council and grass roots levels were the intended debate forums. The regional meetings were intended, in part, to facilitate lower tier meetings. However, although the minutes of the Steering Board⁴ state that “Members agreed that time should be allocated at the regional meetings to offer ‘tutorials’ to those people interested in running local meetings”, this did not take place. “There was nothing about advising people on how to go about arranging debates. I filled in the forms but heard nothing,” one member of a large membership organisation intending to run a meeting told GeneWatch.

11. Despite these criticisms, it was clear that many people were keen to try this new form of participation. Estimates of the number of public meetings held ranges from 130 to 500. Some 37,000 feedback forms were returned and 24,609 people visited the website, 61% of whom submitted forms. However, because of the restricted time scale and poor organisation, many of the people who participated were those who had already thought about GM foods and crops and formed opinions.

12. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) decided to conduct a totally separate exercise from the public debate to investigate peoples' attitudes to GM foods. This involved:

- holding a Citizens' Jury to address the question: “Should GM foods be on sale in the UK?”;
 - undertaking research with low-income consumers on their attitudes to GM foods;
 - holding several schools debates.
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¹ National debate on commercialisation of GM crops—AEBC'S response. July 2002. Available on www.aebc.gov.uk.

² Minutes of the AEBC Meeting 11-12 September 2002, para 12. http://www.aebc.gov.uk/aebc/meetings/meetings_110902_minutes.shtml

³ Government's 10-day public roadshow opens with a whimper. *The Guardian*, 4 June, 2003.

⁴ Minutes Steering Board meeting 23 May 2003, paragraph 12. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_27052003.doc

13. By having their own separate process rather than working with the independent Public Debate Steering Board, the FSA came under justified criticism from many quarters. This included some members of the Steering Board who were concerned about the confusion created and the independence of the process⁵. Three leading consumer groups, the National Consumer Council, Consumers' Association and Sustain, also criticised the FSA's public debate information considering it pro-industry and anti-consumer⁶. Even the FSA's own Consumers' Committee criticised the Agency's separation from the wider debate process.

14. GeneWatch acted as a witness at the Citizens' Jury held in Slough in April 2003. The process was broadcast via a live web link, allowing people to hear the witnesses but not the Jury's deliberations. In contrast with best practice in situations where a jury is considering a highly controversial subject, there was no independent steering board and the FSA did not consider that the Public Debate Steering Board was worth consulting in depth about the question posed or the conduct of the Jury. Instead, they left this to the private company, Opinion Leader Research, who were contracted to organise the citizens' jury.

15. The FSA's process became mired in further controversy because the verdict of a majority of the Jury that GM food should be available to buy in the UK was the headline of the FSA press release on the outcomes⁷. The unanimous opinions that GM crops should not be grown in the UK at present and that comprehensive labelling was needed to ensure consumer confidence had less prominence. The FSA has sent the findings of all its research to the Government⁸.

16. The findings of GeneWatch's review suggest that the Government should take the following steps to ensure that the information gained from the public debate is capitalised upon and lessons are learned:

17. Political commitment: clear connection with policy and decision making

- make a statement which demonstrates the weight it will place on the findings of the public debate—unless the whole process is to be a waste of taxpayers' money, this has to be significant;
- ensure that in any future exercises in public participation, the way in which the findings will inform policy is made clear before the process starts—without this, there is little reason or incentive for people to become engaged.

18. Time: enough time, at the right time

- reopen the public debate for a period of at least three months in November when the findings of the FSEs have been published—only this will ensure the widest and best informed public is engaged;
- ensure that future exercises consider more carefully the length of time over which they are conducted and that they are not overshadowed or hampered by other parallel processes.

19. Money: sufficient funding, wisely spent

- ask the Audit Commission to review the spending on the public debate and determine what were the implications of the constraints in funding;
- ensure that any future public debates are properly funded.

20. Expertise and support: using people experienced in public engagement

- review the performance of the Central Office of Information (COI) in the public debate and investigate whether there is any evidence of mismanagement or incompetence—considerable public funding has been expended and it is important to determine whether the COI have acted properly;
- recognise that a public debate is not a public relations exercise but requires special skills and ensure that only properly qualified and experienced organisations are used in any future public participation exercises.

21. Information: quality materials, professionally produced

- make the findings of the Science and Economics Reviews and FSE results key resources in a reopened public debate—there must be investment in providing these in imaginative and engaging ways;
- undertake research to establish what are the key principles of good quality information provision in such a public engagement exercise.

September 2003

⁵ See letter from Professor Malcolm Grant, Chair of the Steering Board to Sir John Krebs, Chairman of the Foods Standards Agency, 5 March 2003 <http://www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk/latest/letters06.asp>

⁶ National Consumer Council Press Release 13 March 2003. "Leading consumer groups unite to condemn the Food Standards Agency (FSA) for shirking a genuine debate on GM."

⁷ See GeneWatch UK Press Release 9 May 2003: Food Standards Agency hides unanimous findings of Citizens' Jury that GM crops should not be grown in the UK now: GeneWatch challenges the FSA to come clean. Available on www.genewatch.org. And: Minutes Public Debate Steering Board meeting 23 May 2003, paragraph 4. http://www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/minutes_27052003.doc

⁸ Food Standards Agency, July 2003. "Consumer views of GM food" Available at: www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/report_gm_activities

Memorandum submitted by Swindon Friends of the Earth (A6)

1. Swindon Friends of the Earth [FoE] provide evidence of the difficulties that we experienced in obtaining materials for the GM Public Debate and in ensuring that the public might be made aware that their views were being sought. A formal public debate meeting was organised by Swindon FOE and Greenpeace but at great financial cost to ourselves and with little support from the media or the local authority.

2. EFRA Committee members will see from the e-mail messages (Annex 1) [Not printed] that we first registered our interest in organising a debate in Swindon as early as 18 February 2003.

3. It was not until the day before the first organised event that we received the material requested and this was despite making several phone calls to the dedicated government GM debate office as well as sending five e-mail messages (Annex 1) [Not printed]. We had no opportunity to test the material beforehand and we had no idea of the quality and nature of the debate material in order to prepare, apart from what we had seen on the web site.

4. EFRA Committee members should note that the official feedback sheet caused some confusion. The “tick box” choices, in order to rate how strongly you felt about the statements posed, were different on the printed response sheet to the online form.

5. We experienced considerable difficulty publicising any of the events. The local daily paper (*Evening Advertiser*) did not run any features on any of the organised events.

6. Problems were exacerbated further when, realising that many members of the public still did not know of the existence of the Public Debate, Swindon FOE and Greenpeace approached Swindon Borough Council on July 3rd for support in hosting a public meeting and booked a town centre venue (16 July) on the understanding that financial and administrative support from the Council would be forthcoming. For reasons still not understood by us, we were told on July 7th that the Council would not support this meeting, but felt it our duty to go ahead anyway, even though this meant shouldering the costs of the venue (£130). On this occasion too, we had virtually no support from the local paper with regard to publicity. The local radio stations did help publicise the event on the day. The local MPs (Julia Drown and Michael Wills) added their support by contacting constituents who had expressed an interest in GM crops in order to let them know that a debate had been organised. Despite the fact that it was holiday time, despite the difficulties experienced in publicising the event and the short time-scale of a few days to organise the debate, we attracted an audience of over 50 people. A straw poll of those present at the meeting showed that at least 10 people did not even know that the a nation-wide GM debate was taking place. Even now we are hearing from people who were not aware that a public debate was taking place. The audience were extremely generous in that we collected £46.68 in order to help raise funds towards the cost of hiring the venue but hosting a public debate still left a big hole in our wallets.

7. We are extremely disappointed that Swindon Borough Council did not back the Public Debate, that the people of Swindon were not given a full opportunity to participate and that few were even aware that their views were being sought. Those that had heard about the debate did not know how they might become involved or respond.

8. The GM Debate Office were seriously understaffed or inept at meeting requests for debate material. They were reluctant to send out feedback sheets to bodies who were not organising formal debates. We are aware of two events where COI would not supply feedback sheets. These were:

- A Food and Farming Event—21 and 22 June 2003 (2.00 pm to 5.00 pm) at the Science Museum, Wroughton, Swindon. The event was billed as a celebration of agriculture, past, present and future. The manager of the event based at the Science Museum was told by COI that because it wasn't a dedicated public debate, they could only supply information that could be given out to the public in order that individuals obtain the feedback material from COI direct! Their excuse was that they didn't want one person filling out loads of forms! The organiser of the event agreed to accept these forms as he didn't know any better. These forms hadn't arrived by 17 June when we last spoke to the organiser.
- Coleshill Organics based near Highworth, Swindon wanted to run a local debate for their 300 customers and to place feedback sheets in their delivery boxes. After contacting COI twice, they were sent about 10 feedback sheets.

9. We are bitter that we had to scabble around at the last minute using up our limited and precious resources in order to run a local debate for the government and were met with nothing but obstructions. However, through our valiant efforts, we anticipate that we may have enabled about 600 individuals respond formally to the debate from the SN 1-7 postal code areas along with the help of Swindon Greenpeace.

10. We continue to hear from people who have only just heard (largely due to seeing our out-of-date posters) that there was a debate going on, and that they are cross to have missed the opportunity to tell the Government just where to put their GM crops!

30 July 2003

Memorandum submitted by M B P Carpenter (A7)

I attended the event which took place at the Brangwyn Hall, Swansea and would like to make comment.

1. Firstly, concerning the CD which all attendees were provided with before the event—listening to this, I received the impression that the content was biased towards placating the general public into believing that this science was an exact one, whereas anyone who has taken the trouble to study material available, this is known to be far from the truth.

2. Secondly, one could hardly call the event a debate—a workshop would be a better description.

Those present were asked to sit at tables sited over the body of the hall where they were asked to deal with a set of questions.

At the end of session, one member from each table was to be invited to give the views emerging from the discussion at his/her table.

At 8.30 the facilitator closed the meeting!

Only approximately two thirds of the views of the groups reporting had been heard at that time!

In view of the importance of this issue and the great play the government had given to the public debate, one could, I think, be forgiven for gaining the impression that the event was stage managed charade.

20 July 2003

Memorandum submitted by The National Trust (A8)

1. INTRODUCTION

(a) The National Trust is the UK's largest farmer. We own an estate of nearly 250,000 hectares of land, much of which is farmed by our 2,000 tenant farmers. We play a number of roles in rural areas: as a landlord, as an important player in the tourist industry, and as a major rural business. We have therefore taken a close interest in the national debate on the future of GM, particularly in relation to the potential commercialisation of GM crops in the UK.

2. GM NATION?

(a) The Government's public GM debate offers a welcome opportunity for wide consultation on the issues surrounding GM technology. The Trust believes it is important that a decision on commercialisation is seen to be made objectively, and that the public has confidence in the decision-making process. Public confidence in decisions made by scientific experts has been undermined by recent events, such as the BSE and Foot and Mouth outbreaks. This has contributed directly to the high levels of public concern over the prospect of GM food. We were therefore pleased that the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recognised the need to engage public opinion in the decision on GM crops. We believe that the idea of conducting open public debates on controversial issues has great potential. Debates could be used to engage and inform the public on future scientific decisions of national importance, helping to address existing mistrust and confusion. This potential use of such a process for other debates makes it all the more important that the highest standards are set for the GM Debate.

(b) However, we have been disappointed by the contrast between the potential and the reality of the GM Nation? debate. As part of a group of organisations, we wrote to Margaret Beckett in May to raise a number of concerns about the way the debate was being planned and conducted. One of our concerns was whether the Central Office of Information was a suitable organisation to run the debate. Although COI had no previous experience with large-scale public engagement exercises, Defra obliged the GM Debate Steering Board to appoint them to conduct the debate.

(c) We were also unhappy with COI's preparations for the debate, and with the way the process subsequently unfolded. An important measure of the debate's success is the number of people participating. We believe COI's approach failed to guarantee sufficient opportunities for interested people to get involved in meetings, where the complex issues surrounding the GM debate could be discussed. COI organised only six meetings across the UK, failing to cover large areas of the country such as London and the South East, the North East and the North West. All other meetings were organised by local authorities and independent groups, using the information provided by COI. The extent to which external organisations could be involved was severely restricted because of the last minute nature of COI's preparations. Requests for local authorities to schedule meetings were only sent in the month before the debate started, and only 10 authorities across the UK were able to comply.

(d) COI contacted the National Trust in March, and asked us to involve our membership in the debate by organising meetings and sending out mailings. We were keen to support the debate process, but the request came too late for us to help. COI demonstrated no awareness of the long lead times required to contact people in this way. This is a particular issue for the Trust given our three million membership. COI

did not propose to help us with the significant costs and the staff time involved in organising meetings or contacting members on behalf of the GM Steering Board. For a charity with limited resources this was not a practical proposition. We did include a short article in our members' magazine encouraging our membership to take part in the debate, but this was all we could do given the late notice we received. This experience suggests that insufficient thought was given to exactly how the debate could engage an audience, or how the process could succeed if responsibility for engagement was passed on to third party organisations.

(e) We are also concerned that it is still unclear how the views of the public will be fed into the decision-making process on GM. The Secretary of State has said, "The public debate is intended to provide people with the opportunity to raise the questions that concern them on the issues surrounding GM, and receive the fullest answers the debate process can provide so that they can make their own judgements." She has not explained how, or whether, the views gathered by the debate process will influence a final decision on GM crops. The lack of a clear commitment to listen to the public undermines the whole rationale behind *GM Nation?* The impression is given of consultation without inclusion. If the debate is not really an exercise in open consultation, it serves no useful purpose.

(f) Our letter to Margaret Beckett also made the point that the ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the Debate must lie with Defra and the Secretary of State. Direct management of the Debate has been delegated to the GM Debate Steering Board, but the Steering Board has been restricted by Defra on key issues such as budget, timescale and choice of consultant to run the Debate. Similarly, COI is responsible for the operation of the Debate, but were effectively placed in that role by Defra. We believe the Secretary of State should accept that responsibility for the outcome of *GM Nation?* lies with her.

7 August 2003

Memorandum submitted by Councillor Margaret Sinclair, Spokesperson on Environmental Sustainability, Glasgow City Council (A9)

As Glasgow City Council's Spokesperson on Environmental Sustainability, I would like to register my disappointment in the conduct of the GM Public Debate. Glasgow City Council requested an information pack in relation to *GM Nation?* The Public Debate, via the official website on Wednesday 21 May 2003, in order to allow ample time to set up a series of information sessions for Councillors and the relevant Council working groups.

The debate was formally launched at the beginning of June, yet by early July the Council had not received the information requested. This prompted me to write to *GM Nation?* The Public Debate on Wednesday 2 July 2003 to express my dissatisfaction with their conduct. No letter of acknowledgement or explanation has yet been received in response to this second correspondence.

It should be noted that even if the information pack had been sent out thereafter, the Public Debate's deadline for comment of mid-July would have resulted in insufficient time to incorporate a series of worthwhile briefings into the Council's Committee schedule. I recognise that for public debate a period of around six weeks would normally suffice, but given the magnitude of this consultation, notwithstanding the importance of the issue itself, I find it unacceptable that it was decided to consult over such a timescale during the summer. Furthermore, to conduct a Public Debate prior to the availability of the full scientific findings, which I believe will be published in autumn 2003, is premature.

Genetically modified food is one of the most high profile environmental issues facing the world today, with potentially massive social, ecological and economic implications, be they good or bad. I am dismayed that Glasgow's elected members, among others, will not have the opportunity to formally comment on the Government's debate over this issue and I would be grateful if you could consider this complaint during the course of your inquiry.

20 August 2003

Memorandum submitted by Jean Ide (A10)

1. I regret that I have not been able to consult my committee on this matter as we have not met during the summer and have all been too busy to undertake the inevitably complicated task of circulating draft comments for approval or amendment.

2. However, I would very much like to record my own reactions as I felt it was, by way of "executive summary", a rather strange affair.

3. For the record, This Association's [The Family Farmers' Association] attitude to GMs is given in this resolution: "In the light of so much conflicting evidence; with family farming organisations in countries already growing GM crops resisting further expansion; with the danger to farming's image from widespread public opinion against GM food and with as yet no long term independent evaluation of their environmental

impact and safety: The Family Farmers' Association believes that Genetically Modified crops should not be commercialised in Britain until more experience is gained in other countries of their impact on the environment and food safety and their value to farmers."

4. I presume it is in order to submit a personal view on the Debate. My immediate reaction on hearing that this public debate was to be organised was to wonder why the public should be asked for its opinion before the results of the field trials were known. I am still wondering. There was also a scientific review in progress, the results of which were not known until the Public Debate was mainly closed.

5. I hoped to attend the official debate in Taunton, but on phoning for details a few days before it I was told I could not go, all places were booked. From the newspaper I learned that some attempt was made to accommodate more people, but I was unable to discover anyone who had at all clear views as to exactly what they learned from the meeting.

6. The only meeting I attended was organised by the NFU for the whole of Devon. This was chaired by a member of the Biotechnology Commission, David Carmichael. He professed to be independent, but his otherwise rather uninformative opening included the statement that a lady in Kenya used to earn £50 a year from her acre of bananas, but since she had GM bananas she was making £600 a year and was able to pay for her children to go to school and to buy more land. I have yet to discover anyone who has heard of GM bananas. (This, of course, does not mean they do not exist). He later confirmed that we were to discuss the growing of GM crops in Britain, not their worldwide possibilities.

7. He then showed a 15 minute official video, which seemed singularly unhelpful. I hope you will watch it and be able to judge for yourselves. Many of the farmers present remarked on the fact that it had taught them nothing.

8. We then had a wide ranging and interesting debate. My impression was that most of those present were opposed to the growing of GM crops in England for many and varied well thought out reasons. One farmer, a member of the NFU's biotechnology committee, spoke strongly in favour. Another said he had been feeding GMs to his broiler chickens for years with no ill effects.

9. It was a little odd that our NFU Regional Director reported in his weekly column in the regional newspaper that the majority at this meeting were in favour. I had the opportunity today to discuss this with another farmer who had been present, and he said his impression was that the majority were opposed. (I mention this as you may have had the newspaper report circulated to you.)

10. I did not discover about any other local meetings in time to go. I read in the paper that there had been meetings with good debates in Plymouth and Cornwall, but I am not sure who organised them.

11. The Crown Copyright document seemed a fair presentation, and it is to be hoped that the results of the poll or questionnaire contained therein will be published. I am not equipped to study material on the internet, so am unable to comment on what the government has produced in that line.

12. What many people I have spoken to would like to know is whether we have any effective choice in the matter. It is thought by many people that if GMOs are once grown in any quantity we shall never be able to get rid of them should they turn out to be undesirable. These people argue that we would be able to stay free of them as an island and that we should do so until there is more experience of their use worldwide. It is similarly suggested that Britain would then be in a position of economic strength if it turned out that GM had long term ill effects. But Mr. Fischler is quoted as saying that no area has the right to keep them out. If this is the case, why the Debate?

10 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (A11)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

abc welcomed the government initiative to hold a three stranded debate, including the public arm GM Nation?

Designing and running such an extensive project was always going to be difficult, particularly given the polarised views. Even so, not enough was done to maximise the effectiveness of *GM Nation?* the public debate.

Among our concerns:

- The terms of reference of the overall programme were not accurately interpreted or followed.
- The general public was not ultimately or effectively engaged.
- The stimulus material was not accurate or adequate.
- The timing did not allow for the Economic and Science Reviews to fully feed into the process.

Too much emphasis and/or credence was placed on *ad hoc* public meetings and writing in, rather than more elaborate public engagement techniques or controlled sampling in properly conducted qualitative and quantitative surveys. As a consequence, the whole process was heavily weighted in favour of already-committed activists being given further opportunities to express their already well known views, rather than an attempt to educate and test the opinion of the grass roots public.

abc would like formally to comment on the specific aspects of the debate, from the emotive naming of the debate through to the ultimate use of the final results.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 abc is the umbrella body for the UK biotechnology industry. Its members are BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Monsanto and Syngenta. It was set up to provide a forum for debate and education surrounding GM technology and its key objective is to promote a reasoned and balanced debate about the use of agriculture biotechnology in the United Kingdom. This is because, on abc's establishment, market research showed that 66% of the UK public felt that they did not know enough about GM crops to come to an informed decision.

1.2 abc therefore, welcomed the government's approach to a three stranded examination of the issues, including an economic assessment, a scientific assessment and a public outreach. In principle we were in full support of the public debate strand of this process, for which Margaret Beckett set out the following terms of reference:

- To identify, using methods which focus on grass roots opinion, the questions which the public has about GM issues, avoiding as far as possible the polarisation that has characterised so much of the discussion to date, and getting to the heart of the issues;
- To develop, from this framing of the issues and through a wholly open process, the provision of comprehensive evidence-based information to the public on scientific, economic and other aspects of GM;
- To provide people with the opportunity to debate the issues openly and to reach their own informed judgements on this subject;
- To provide information to government on how questions raised by the public have shaped the course of the debate, including on the scientific economic and other aspects of GM.

1.3 We believed that these terms of reference above would allow for an open, informed and well conducted debate, which would:

- Give an opportunity to the general public to obtain information on GM crops and so allow them to make an informed judgement on the relative merits and benefits of the technology, particularly following the publication of the Farm Scale Evaluations.
- Give the "real public" a voice in a debate that had been politicised and polarised by various groups with vested interests.
- Provide an opportunity to de-politicise the FSE programme. This had been consistently, but wrongly reported as being the green/red light decision on GM crops since its inception in 1999. Clearly it was never this, but a set of trials designed simply to find out how changes in farm management practice associated with the growing of GM crops, affect the abundance and diversity of UK farmland wildlife. The public debate gave the opportunity for people to look at all aspects of GM crops and to recognise that there are a raft of other regulatory as well as socio-economic aspects to assess.
- Indicate if the public is deeply ambivalent about GM and the issue has a low saliency. There is little survey evidence that unprompted, the public is uniformly and actively opposed to GM, as some of the activist groups have alleged. This had been shown on many occasions and is further confirmed by the most recent opinion research conducted during the height of the debate where The IGD said in their latest Consumer Watch:
 - 13% of consumers actively avoid GM foods.
 - 13% of consumers would welcome GM products onto supermarket shelves.
 - 74% are not sufficiently concerned about GM food to actively look to avoid it.

1.4 abc wishes to comment specifically on certain aspects of the process of *GM Nation?* in which it felt the process was not particularly helpful in encouraging grass roots opinion to be heard and the written material supplied to participants, lacked the evidence base required as stated in the terms of reference:

2. MEETINGS

2.1 At the inception of the process, the Secretary of State stated that the public debate was not a referendum on GM crops. However, the name *GM Nation?* gave the opposite impression. Further, the title implied that it was an all or nothing decision, not that there would be choice and co-existence.

2.2 *GM Nation?* was launched on 3 June this year. While there was little advertising, abc does not agree with some that there was no publicity. Broadsheets, TV and radio programmes such as the Today programme ran stories from the end of 2002 on *GM Nation?*, what it was, and when it would be taking place. abc agrees with the approach that the majority of funds for the debate should have been targeted at public engagement and information rather than advertising.

2.3 The process of having a cascade of meetings was positive. Opinion polls show that GM crops are not high on people's list of priorities and so the number of people that would travel great distances to attend meetings on the subject would be limited. Thus, facilitating local meetings was a good attempt at getting engagement from the grass roots.

2.4 However, it relied too much on the meeting format. For example, it is likely that more people would have participated in an interactive TV programme than venture out to the local village hall.

2.5 In addition, any interested party could organise an event and so the majority of people who actively set about holding a debate already held an interest or view and invited a non-representative audience to participate. So while this *ad hoc* system led to a few hundred debates, it is very questionable as to whether this reached a true cross section of the public, which was the original aim of the process.

2.6 As a consequence, few conclusions can be drawn from the public meetings, which often served as forums for activists and the politically committed. Public meetings are not the same as public opinion.

2.7 Groups including Consumers' Association, Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace deliberately timed an attack on the public consultation, which coincided with the launch of the debate in order to undermine the process. They suggested that the government would not listen to the outcome and that it was badly organised and under-resourced. This probably led to some members of the public concluding that it was not worth taking part. Therefore, by making the process less representative, the activist groups helped to fulfil their own prophecy.

2.8 The initial meeting in Birmingham turned into a media circus and an opportunity for the activists to grandstand. There was little time for debate and the views of public were drowned out by polemical argument. Unfortunately, this became a blueprint for the other regional events. abc was present at all of these first tier regional meetings. The regional meeting in the South West was the most well attended, but also was the most overwhelmed by vehement anti-GM protestors. The Scotland meeting was sidetracked by anti-American and anti-Westminster sentiment, primarily as a consequence of the Iraq war.

2.9 As the debate progressed, Defra and the AEBC secretariat referred all requests for pro-GM speakers to abc in order to facilitate attendance by members of abc. This worked well and we worked hard to facilitate such requests. It is interesting to note however, that of the 600 plus meetings that apparently took place, abc was only invited to speak and represent a pro-GM stance, at 60 meetings, giving further evidence to the balance of debate "required" at many of these meetings. Of these 60 meetings, we were able to attend nearly 40, and the debates continue despite the formal end of *GM Nation?* in July. abc will continue as they did before the debate ie to take the opportunity to present the industry view, when asked.

3. STIMULUS MATERIAL

3.1 Our biggest concern about the *GM Nation?* debate process was the provision of the stimulus material. The one thing that the GM debate does not lack is evidence. Yet the stimulus material concentrated on opinions and gave no opportunity for factual evidence to be cited or weighted.

3.2 The public debate was launched with a set of stimulus material, available in both CD-ROM and paper forms, with positive and negative opinions rather than fact on a wide range of subjects many of which were not specific to GM such as trust in Governments, multi-national companies, globalisation etc. Of the opinions expressed on GM evidence to corroborate these views was absent. In the absence of this weighting and given that this material was the primary information source for the debate, the facts regarding the regulation, testing for safety, and the genuine response of farmers who grow GM crops, were reduced to assertions. Sadly, under such conditions, factually unsupported questions, responses or criticisms assume equal weighting.

3.3 It is our belief, that the personal opinions and assertions given in the booklet should have been followed by an independent scientist explaining some of the evidence or data, not necessarily drawing a conclusion, but giving an explanation. Without such guidance, abc feel most members of the public were left with little understanding or guidance on an in-depth topic.

4. COMMISSIONED REPORT

4.1 It is unfortunate that neither the Science Review nor the Economic Review strands of the public debate were available during the formal part of the public debate. Many of the shortcomings of the stimulus material could have been obviated if they had been.

4.2 The Economic Review was published first but appeared to focus more on consumer attitudes than the economics of GM crops. It concentrated on the macro-economic level and ignored or minimised the importance of much of the evidence that GM technology can improve economic viability. As a consequence, its main conclusions did little to put into context the fact that GM technology has the ability in the first three crops to make farming at an individual level, significantly more profitable. We were left with the conclusion that the contribution from GM crops in the first instance would be relatively small and dependent on consumer uptake. This is not surprising, given that the crops currently under consideration are of relatively minor significance to UK agriculture, the turnover of UK agriculture as a whole is less than the value of the ready made sandwich market and that consumers are currently denied the opportunity to choose GM products.

4.3 The Science Review was published shortly after the economics report and again too late to have an effect on the formal public debate. Nevertheless, this report re-confirmed and further enforced both the safety of current GM crops and food and the effectiveness of the current regulatory process. This further undermined many of the opinions expressed by those opposed to the technology that were put forward in the stimulus material and many of the unsubstantiated but well received messages that were banded about during the debate.

4.4 Whilst the Food Standards Agency (FSA) input to the public debate does not fall under the remit of the select committee inquiry, it is relevant since it demonstrates what can be achieved with a minimal financial outlay. The FSA carried out a 'schools debate' and Citizens' Jury in which non-stakeholders were able to sift through information similar to the *GM Nation?* stimulus material. The fundamental difference however, was the opportunity for the jury members to challenge the viewpoints of the various stakeholders (including abc).

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 abc welcomes the public debate, but are disappointed that in many ways, it did not fulfil many of the expectations or even some of its main objectives.

5.2 It is clear that *GM Nation?* did not fulfil the expectations of increasing the knowledge base of the general public. Much of this is due to the lack of evidence-based fact that was contained within the stimulus material which only served to continue the polarisation of the debate rather than to take the debate forward. The unfortunate timing of the debate meant that the science review and economic assessment were not available at the time.

5.3 *GM Nation?* has not reduced the politicisation of the Farm Scale Evaluations, but has rather heightened it. This is clear from the Early Day Motions tabled in parliament and from general commentary in the press.

5.4 It was disappointing that those opposed to the technology hijacked most of the meetings and attempted to undermine and engineer the results of the debate, rather than entering into a genuine discussion. Given the publicity and high profile of the debate, the number of people that took part was surprisingly low. Additionally, given the profile of the vast majority of the people that attended the six main debates and the profile of the people who attended and even organised the other debates, it is not possible to use this information as any realistic indication of the mood of the "public". It is well known that when the general public is invited to take part in a debate, the majority of participants who attend will already hold a strong opinion on the subject. Thus, the process of a public meeting does not achieve a view of public opinion. We can instead conclude that as the debate was largely attended by the NGOs, the public level of concern for this technology is minimal and they remain predominantly ambivalent.

15 September 2003

Supplementary memorandum submitted by the Agricultural Biotechnology Council (A11a)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As stated in our first submission abc welcomed the government initiative to hold a debate with three strands, including the public consultation process called *GM Nation?*

The concerns we expressed prior to the report being published were:

- *The terms of reference of the overall programme were not accurately interpreted or followed*
- *The general public was not ultimately or effectively engaged*

- *The stimulus material was not accurate or adequate*
- *The timing did not allow for the Economic and Science Reviews to fully feed into the process.*

Now that we have seen the final report and have had time to considering its findings and conclusions, we offer the below supplementary information. That, in brief, concludes that:

- *The report itself recognises that those people that attended the meetings were self-selecting (paragraph 79)*
- *The method used to “determine” the actual number of debates that took place was flawed*
- *Public meetings were dominated by those opposed to the technology*
- *The Narrow but Deep groups are the only methodologically sound results from the GM Nation process, underlined by the fact that these seem more aligned to other surveys*
- *The process did not fulfill its wider remit of reaching a wider grass roots audience*
- *The vast majority of those that returned feedback forms already had fixed views on GM.*

VALIDITY OF THE REPORT FINDINGS

It is interesting to note that media coverage focused on the feedback form responses submitted to the debate.

At first sight, the fact that some 37,000-feedback forms were received appears to give the process credibility that it reached a wide range of people. This was not accurate.

Any attempt to gauge public opinion on a controversial issue by asking people to write in with their views is bound to be questionable. This “petition signing” approach inevitably encourages people with strong and hostile views to respond, and others for whom the issue is less salient, not to do so. It also encourages an approach based on organised opposition. We believe that the public consultation should have been discussed with an appropriate professional body (eg the Market Research Society) to agree a methodologically sound process. Quantitative as well as qualitative research should have been commissioned.

Cluster Analysis of the Feedback forms show that only 12% of those received could be considered to be from people with no fixed views on GM (paragraph 132). Indeed this provides even more evidence of a lack of success of the process to reach grass roots general public either through feedback forms on the web-site or in public meetings.

The report clearly states that those people who attended the meetings were self-selecting (paragraph 79) and may have been encouraged by family, friends or pressure groups. Of the 6 regional meetings attended by members of abc, we estimate that 70% to 80% of all attendees were opposed to the technology and of these, many were members of organised campaign groups. It would appear from all of the independent reports that we have seen, that this analysis of the attendees is universal. It is also clear that the cascading to second and third tier meetings was largely organised by environmental groups, which by default means that the attendees were even more self-selecting.

The report suggests that working back from the number of feedback forms that were requested, that some 20,000 people attended the meetings (paragraph 82). Whilst we question this figure, even if true, it represents a very small minority of the UK population—especially if as all estimates suggest fewer than 25% of the attendees (5,000) could be considered to be from the general public with no fixed opinion on the subject. It is also interesting to note that given the estimates of attendance, and the self-selection of the attendees, that, at best, the attendees represented only 10% of the UK Greenpeace membership.

The report described the number of people who attended the meetings as being some 20,000. This figure is an extrapolation from the number of feedback forms that were requested (a request for more than 30 forms were considered to be a meeting; paragraph 82). This is a somewhat arbitrary way of calculating the number of meetings—as there is no way that this figure can be validated. abc was a primary source of speakers for these meetings but received only 60 requests. Therefore, we seriously question whether this number of meetings actually took place.

This leaves us with a more serious question. If the number of meetings was significantly lower than suggested in the report—say perhaps 300—then the actual number of attendees that represented the “general public” was probably less than 2,000 people. This in no way could be considered the have fulfilled the Secretary of State’s wishes that the debate should reach grass roots public.

We draw the committee’s attention to the scientific appraisal of the process published in Nature (1) and the report itself, that states that 51% of the feedback forms were in hard copy form and 49% on the website (paragraph 108). This suggests that some of the feedback forms were in fact double counted. Given that those who attended the meetings were highly motivated this conclusion seems very probable. For this reason, these results should be considered with caution.

Clearly if a number of these “meetings” did not take place, but provided the opportunity for those highly motivated individuals to “vote” several times—then the results of the wider feedback form analysis are even less representative of the general public.

We do not feel as suggested in paragraph 29 of *GM Nation?* that the report “provides evidence about what the public thinks and feels about GM issues”.

We would also like to draw the committee’s attention to two recent surveys, the Eurobarometer and the IGD’s Consumer Watch GM Foods (2 & 3) which are methodologically sound and show that the UK public has ambivalent views and are not in principle opposed to the technology; and as many people would welcome GM back onto shelves as would actively avoid it.

This view is reiterated by Prof Gaskell in his paper “Ambivalent *GM nation?* Public attitudes to biotechnology in the UK, 1991–2002,” published at the height of *GM Nation?* and attached as (4).

NARROW BUT DEEP FOCUS GROUP

Our analysis of the results disputes the widely reported view that as people discovered more about the technology, the more sceptical they became. The results (page 45) show that following discussion more people felt GM could:

- provide cheaper food
- help British farmers compete with those abroad
- have medical benefits
- help developing countries

In addition, most people still believed that GM could help the environment by reducing inputs such as chemicals and fossil fuels.

Paragraph 209 of the report states “the general public have a lower degree of outright opposition to GM than the self-selecting component who involved themselves in the debate”. It is therefore disappointing that campaign groups and the media have perpetuated the misperception of the results.

In Conclusion we would State that:

- **Narrow but Deep (ie focus groups) were the only methodologically valid results from the GM Nation process and these seem more aligned to other surveys**
- **Wider public consultation was hi-jacked by those opposed to the technology**
- **It did not fulfill its remit of reaching a wider grass roots audience or take the debate the away from the stale polemics that have typified the debate so far.**

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21 October 2003

Memorandum submitted by Alan Simpson MP (A12)

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The *GM Nation?* debate intended to be a welcome process, allowing the public to participate in the making of big and controversial decisions. Despite the concerns brought up in the following passages the debate attracted a good response from the public, where they were able to find out how to participate.

1.2 The central issues focused around the following issues:

- the budget and timing of the Debate;

- the role of the COI (Central Office of Information);
- the adequacy of publicity;
- the role played by the FSA;
- the Debates themselves;
- the issues that were avoided.

These are the criticisms that this submission focuses on.

2. BUDGET AND TIMING

2.1 The amount of time and money allocated for the debate was simply inadequate to facilitate the type of process required by the Public Debate Steering Board (SB), and also of that demanded by the complexity of the issue. Problems were created for the SB when, halfway through the process, the original budget (based on figures from the COI⁹) had to be revised and the time extended. Defra did cover the additional management costs incurred by the COI as a result of the extension and the final budget was double the original amount. However, the amount was still insufficient to fulfil the task that had been set. Yet another factor that hindered public participation was the lack of funding for promotion and advertising. The budget allocation for publicity was non-existent. Organisers of local meetings had to foot the bill for these events themselves. These were often small, unfunded voluntary organisations or even individuals. As a result of the COI failing to follow up requests for assistance, many local meetings were simply inadequately resourced.

2.2 The *GM Nation?* stimulus materials (and details of the public debate county and local meetings) were not available until the launch date in June. Potential organisers had no idea what was required or what was available to support them. Requests to extend the debate to allow more local meetings to be organised were rejected by the Secretary of State, adding to the suspicion that the Government was working to “approval timetable” rather than an open consultation.

2.3 Government guidelines for public consultation exercises allow at least a two or three month period. In this case the public debate was only allowed six weeks. This was grossly insufficient as it meant that many members of the public were only just hearing of the debate as it was coming to an end. Similarly many local authorities found it impossible to participate in the debate within the allotted time frame.

2.4 The timing of the public debate was defective on two other grounds. Critical information was inaccessible throughout the debate. This was partly because the Strategy Unit Report was only released days before the end of the process and the Science Review was not published until after the debates had finished. Moreover, the results of the Farm Scale Evaluations (an exercise deemed by the Government as critical to the future development of GM crops in the UK) were also unavailable to the participants of the public debate. The public perception was that this was deliberate rather than unfortunate.

3. APPOINTMENT AND ROLE OF THE COI

3.1 The Central Office of Information (COI) was appointed as the main contractor to deliver the *GM Nation?* programme of events and materials. Two factors made this decision controversial: It raised questions about how independent from Government this would be. Additionally there were concerns that the COI lacked both the experience and the competence to manage a public debate of this kind. These misgivings were expressed by both the AEBC¹⁰ and the members of the Steering Board. The SB was not able to consider alternative contractors. It was told that the COI would have to be used due to the limited time and budget. Also, Defra had regular management meetings with the COI beyond that required to ensure budget management. It appeared that Defra were keen to keep control over the debate despite the public suggestion that it was independent of Government.

3.2 There were certain areas of the debate where the COI demonstrated a lack of experience. This was particularly evident with the design of the open deliberative element of the debate. The guidance needed by the SB was not forthcoming for the creation of a debate which would imaginatively engage the public; especially a public suspicious of GM and of the Government’s intentions. The debate failed to provide a public basis for understanding and exploring scientific doubt about GM technologies. It did not enable the public to make their own risk assessments about whether Britain needs GM crops or of alternative choices about secure and sustainable food supplies. The debate was therefore constructed within narrow and limiting terms.

3.3 Information and materials necessary for participating in the debate were not easily accessible. There are numerous accounts from NGOs and members of the public facing real difficulties in obtaining help via the contact points set up by the CIO. Such difficulties, during the process of the public debate, suggest that the COI lacked the capacity to deal with the administration and organisation of the process. This basic administrative failure will have limited the numbers able to take part in the debate.

⁹ Central Office of Information.

¹⁰ Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission is the Government strategic advisory body on biotechnology issues affecting agriculture and the environment.

3.4 Further concerns expressed of the role of the COI:

- A failure to understand the breadth and scope of the process proposed by the AEBC
- A serious underestimate of the budget needed to deliver a credible public process
- A failure to develop stimulus materials that had been sufficiently tested prior to the commencement of the debate
- A failure to offer local meeting organisers sufficient support
- Failure to proactively encourage local meetings especially in areas of the country or communities where the inhabitants had not joined in the long running debate on GM.
- Problems with the use of the CD
- Problems in distributing response forms (eg one person was posted a form completed by someone else)
- The electronic response form was different to the paper version
- Poor response time to telephone enquiries.

4. PUBLICITY

4.1 In simple terms, there was insufficient publicity given to the process to make it a genuine national debate. Because of the limited budget there was no allocation for advertising and promotion. Publicity was limited to media coverage and this was at best erratic.

4.2 There was no significant or repeated publicity in either of the main farming publications—*Farmers Guardian* or *Farmers Weekly*.

5. THE ROLE OF THE FSA

5.1 The Food Standards Agency organised a Citizen's jury, focus groups, a schools debate, video and publication on GM. The FSA's intervention in the public debate has been criticised by the FSA's Consumer Committee as being biased. Outside organisations took the same view. It cannot be helpful for the FSA to be seen as a sales team for the biotech industry when its central role is that of a public watch dog. The FSA spent £110,000 on this and did so without prior consultation with the *GM Nation?* steering board. It did not appear to be the wisest or best use of public money.

5.2 The FSA report to ministers on the GM debate was produced before the debate had even concluded. This fuelled public cynicism about their role in the debate.

6. THE "DEBATES"

6.1 One major criticism of the debates was the unbalanced pro-GM scientific representation of the speakers. Pro-GM scientists (many supported by the biotech corporations) were out in force but were keen to avoid the awkward issues of scientific doubt and to sidestep key areas of contention. Members of the public raising serious concerns about risk and risk assessment were brushed aside. Public criticism was that the debates were often used to intimidate and discredit opponents rather than subject the science to serious scrutiny. There was also criticism about the biasing of "expert panels for the debates".

6.2 The Berkshire GM debate, at the University of Reading, was a good example of this. The University has a strong pro-GM stance and local GM companies were strongly represented at the meeting. Those putting a pro-GM case were a principal research fellow at the university and a scientist from Syngenta. Those putting the case against were a member of the University Students' Union and a local anti-GM activist. Nothing in the debate was designed to subject the science to tough scrutiny.

6.3 In another debate one of the pro-GM speakers introduced himself as a molecular biologist, but not as a member of a biotech company funded by Monsanto. Monsanto representatives arrived with the speaker, conducted a press interview with him and answered difficult questions on his behalf. They also repeatedly sought to challenge the credentials of speakers putting the anti-GM case. The public were left wondering why the biotech industry was allowed such a high profile role in the conduct of the debate.

6.4 No attempt was made by the COI or the Steering Board to clarify the scientific issues that needed to be addressed in the debate. This meant that misleading claims were able to be repeated without ever being explored. In the debate at Coventry Town Hall the claim that "DNA is DNA is DNA" was used to suggest that GM-DNA is no different from natural DNA and ignoring the fact that integration of transgenic DNA into a cell's genome (rather than its absorption into a cell) is one of the big risk areas that we currently know little or nothing about.

6.5 Key players were left out of the debate. Despite being the people who would either directly use or have their neighbours' use of GM crops indirectly impact upon their lives, farmers' voices have been surprisingly limited in the overall debate. Recent figures published by FARM¹¹ reveal that in a sample of 600 farmers randomly selected across England and the Welsh borders 51% disagreed with the development of GM crops would overall benefit farmers, with 11% strongly disagreeing. Farmers, however, were given limited opportunity to voice this opinion during the debate.

6.6 Although NFU attempted to organise meetings in their own right these did not prove effective in delivering large scale farmer involvement or an interaction between farmers and consumers. The timing of the debate meant that many farmers were unable to become involved as they were busy with silage-making and preparations for harvest. It isn't rocket science to know that if you want to gather farmers together in discussion groups or other meetings, you need to get them before or preferably after harvest (The Royal Show excepted). October through to February is the most productive time to get farmers into a meeting room.

6.7 Only three official national debates were scheduled across England. This did not include Norfolk, the potential heartland of commercialisation. Why was such a key area ignored? The few large scale farmer proponents of GM are represented in Norfolk and ought to have been required to address the critical arguments of those against the technology.

7. DEBATING WHAT?

7.1 To have a useful, informed debate, the key areas of scientific disagreement should have been clearly laid out before the public. The public were asked to debate in an information vacuum, and worse. No critical, relevant scientific evidence on the problems and hazards of GM crops as opposed to the potential benefits was presented.

7.2 There is a *priori* and empirical evidence (presented in Annex 1) suggesting that GM is inherently unsafe and unpredictable. There are easily identifiable critical areas of scientific doubt or challenge. These key areas of scientific concern should have been presented to the public and addressed independently. This, rather than the "case by case" approach recommended by the GM Science Review First Report, is what the public have a right to expect of government.

7.3 There was also a failure to present the many health, environmental and social benefits of sustainable non-GM agriculture as opposed to GM agriculture. The debate failed to address the alternatives to GM—both in terms of crop management techniques and non-transgenic plant breeding techniques, such as Marker Assisted Selection. Any informed decision about GM can not be reached without a full appraisal of costs and benefits and these need to be weighed against those for alternative strategies.

7.4 The debate did not even attempt to address public concerns over safety of GM crops for health and the environment, the absence of tests about allergenicity, or the social and economic impact of commercial GM crops production already affecting farmers in the United States, Canada, India and elsewhere.

7.5 Throughout "the debate" the public was faced with a serious lack of critical information on GM. They were also kept in the dark about what use the Government intended to make of the debate. Public scepticism about the Government's intention to take any notice of the outcomes of the debate was a major factor in the public's attitude towards the debate process itself. Deep scepticism based on historic mistrust of Government's actions on this issue and legitimate doubts about the displacement of independent science by "bought" science meant that public perception of the debate was that the process was little more than a PR exercise.

7.6 The steering board did try to elicit from the Secretary of State assurances that the Government would act on the results of the process. The ambiguity of the government's response inevitably affected the level of public involvement. Never the less we must not detract from the efforts put in by tens of thousands of people around the country to take part in this debate. The demands for involvement that went unmet, indicate both the level of public concern about this issue and the extent to which the government has failed to carry the public with it in its desire to press ahead with early GM crop commercialisation.

Alan Simpson MP

September 2003

¹¹ FARM is a campaigning organisation set up by working farmers for working farmers, but its membership is also open to and represented by the wider public. The organisation's overall objective is to fight for a sustainable and diverse food and farming sector in the UK. Its membership is not restricted to membership to any particular sector, system or scale of farming.

POST SCRIPT

This submission has been put together following discussions with, and contributions of evidence from, a range of individuals and groups concerned about the conduct of the *GM Nation?* debate. In particular I would like to thank Clare Devereux Director of Five Year Freeze (also a member of the steering board overseeing the process of the debate), Sue Mayer of GeneWatch, Dr Mae-Wan Ho of the Institute for Science in Society (I-SIS), Robin Maynard of FARM, Pete Riley of Friends of the Earth, Members of Friends of the Earth Wokingham and Caroline Clarke of the Burnhams Group, for the assistance they have given me.

Annex 1:

THE SCIENCE AND “THE DEBATE”

The Select Committee Inquiry is into the conduct of the *GM Nation?* debate, not the scientific arguments for or against GM crop technology. It is relatively simple, however, to set out the areas of scientific dispute or concern that the COI, the government and/or the Steering Board should have ensured were acknowledged and addressed. At a time when there is so much (understandable) public doubt about scientific assurances, the organisers of the debate had a duty to make these issues both understandable and accessible to the public.

The major areas of scientific controversy were known to government before “the Debate” was launched, but no adequate attempt was made to enable the public to understand the limits of what science can and cannot tell us about GM technology. This is particularly important in respect of the following:

1. Is GM technology just another form of plant breeding or not?

Proponents say “yes”, opponents say “no”. The technology clearly has the ability to cross breeding frontiers that nature has hitherto prevented. The disputed aspects of this are about the genetic stability of plants created, their reliability/predictability and their interaction with other parts of the human, animal and plant environment.

2. What are the risks of horizontal gene transfer?

There is a serious scientific debate about whether genetically modified DNA can be taken up and integrated within the cell structure of other (non-related) species. It is not clear how much we know about this and the risks it carries in relation to cross-species illness/infection. An honest appraisal of what science can currently tell us about such risks is an essential part of any informed decision making.

3. Is there a difference between GM DNA and non-GM/natural DNA?

There is the same yes/no disagreement on this. It is clear however, that GM DNA is manufactured to be strong enough to implant itself within another genome and not be rejected by it. The most immediate questions are whether this carries with it an increased risk of spreading antibiotic and drug resistance, or creating new disease agents. The routine use of antibiotic marker genes in GM crops makes this an important risk area that the public has yet to understand or believe has been properly clinically trialled.

4. Do GM DNA's have “recombination hotspots” that carry attendant risks?

GM technology is not just about being able to insert a gene into a completely different gene sequence. It is about ensuring that the gene then has the ability to assert itself. This is done by way of a ‘promoter’. The most widely used is from the cauliflower mosaic virus, CaMV 35s. Concerns have already been raised about whether this viral promoter can recombine with other genes to make them over-express with harmful consequences including cancer. The public have a right to know what independent research is being done that assesses the health implications for this.

5. Can GM crops affect those who consume them?

The huge controversy over the Pusztai experiments resolved nothing. If the research was defective it needs to be repeated properly. The issue it raised was about the effect of the transgenic process or the transgenic DNA on the stomach and intestinal lining. Public concern about the implications of this in direct human consumption (and in the indirect consumption of livestock fed on GM crops) needed to be addressed. They need to know why no repeat experiments have been or are being undertaken to address this.

6. Is there a link between GM products and increased allergenicity?

Repeated claims are made about the safety of GM products, though there is serious scientific challenge about whether any of the products have been clinically trialled. Their widespread use in food products in the USA gets cited as “evidence” of no harm. Counter claims that this has gone hand in hand with a huge increase in food-borne diseases within the USA, simply beg the questions about what independent research has been conducted on the issue.

As far as I could see neither the COI, the Steering Board, nor any other official body involved in the organising of the national Debate made serious efforts to make these areas of scientific doubt/dispute an accessible part of the information base offered to the public. Without such a base, how can an adult and

informed assessment of risk be undertaken? How could “the debate” be more than a sales pitch? If the government wanted a meaningful public debate then these areas of scientific dispute had to be part of the scrutiny process.

September 2003

Memorandum submitted by the National Consumer Council (A13)

The National Consumer Council (NCC) is an independent consumer expert, championing the consumer interest to bring about change for the benefit of all consumers. We do this by working with people and organisations that can make change happen—governments, regulators, business and people and organisations who speak on behalf of consumers.

We are independent of government and all other interests. We conduct rigorous research and policy analysis and draw on the experiences of consumers and other consumer organisations. We have linked organisations in England Scotland and Wales, and a close relationship with colleagues in Northern Ireland. And we work with consumer organisations in Europe and worldwide to influence European and global governments and institutions.

We are a non-departmental body, limited by guarantee, and funded mostly by the Department of Trade and Industry.

This memorandum responds to a request from the Clerk of the Committee for a written submission in connection with the Committee’s Inquiry into the conduct of the GM public debate.

1. The NCC is working on developing and promoting models of risk governance that better reflect the consumer interest and perspectives. Issues such as BSE, MMR vaccination, GM crops and mobile phone safety are just some of the issues that raise questions about how consumers respond to risk and uncertainty. Consumers are sometimes said by policy-makers and experts to behave irrationally in the face of risk, yet our understanding of how consumers actually approach risk and uncertainty is limited. This must change if the government is to assess, manage and communicate risk more effectively.

2. The NCC has also undertaken a considerable amount of work on consumer involvement¹². In the NCC report involving consumers: everyone benefits, a number of key ingredients are identified for successful public consultation. Complete clarity about the objective for involving consumers is essential. The aim should be to make consumer involvement second nature. It should be built into policy-making processes as early as possible, not added on at the end. Different purposes are better served by different methodologies. For consumer involvement to be meaningful, it needs to be carried out for positive reasons based on a real need. It should encourage and enable consumers to be effectively involved and have a real influence.

3. The NCC supported the GM Public Debate. We believe it is very important that the public have a say in the future of GM crops. We also very much support the work of the AEBC in developing proposals for the public debate and for the work of the independent steering board chaired by Prof Malcolm Grant set up to oversee the process.

Consulting consumers/public is an important point of principle in our model of “good” risk governance, particularly where there are issues of scientific uncertainty and/or controversy (both in this case). Other countries have a stronger tradition of citizen or consumer participation in decision-making but in the UK the Public Debate was unprecedented and so we believe it is important to evaluate the process (as well as the outcome) and to learn the lessons from it. This process is important not just for the GM issue but for the future of public consultation across government as a whole.

PURPOSE OF THE DEBATE

4. The NCC believes that government failed to make sufficiently clear the purpose of the debate. Was it to simply to seek the views of the British public? Or was it to go further and to allow the public to feel that they could participate in debate on the issue and actually make their voices heard?

5. Secondly, the government failed to make clear what influence the outcomes of the Public Debate would have on its decision-making process. Indeed it sought to distance the two and this still remains unclear. The NCC and other research, shows that honesty about the limits for and potential for consumer/public influence are an essential element in any successful public engagement strategy. Without such clarity and understanding the public are more likely to display cynicism towards the process. If people believe the exercise to be tokenistic they will be deterred from taking part.

¹² Involving consumers: everyone benefits September 2002.

6. NCC research¹³ shows that low-income consumers most strongly lack trust in the way that government and officialdom handle matters of risk and uncertainty such as GM, and are most likely to consider public consultation a token gesture and therefore pointless. Consequently, it is not surprising that levels of apathy among these consumers are high. Overcoming such apathy was always going to be a challenge for the public debate, particularly given the widespread public distrust of government decision-making on GM.

NCC briefings¹⁴ show that only one in six people consider that the government listens to what ordinary people think. Only 31% say they trust the government to tell the truth on GM. Given this background, it was extremely unfortunate that greater clarity of the relationship between the public debate and government policy making was not forthcoming. This, again, will have deterred some people from participating in the debate, since they did not believe that the government had a genuinely open mind on the issue.

RESOURCES

7. Any kind of public engagement, particularly on the scale envisaged by *GM Nation?*, costs money and sufficient resources need to be allocated. A lot of valuable time was wasted initially trying to get more money allocated by Defra, which delayed the whole process.

8. Equally important to successful public involvement is allowing sufficient time for engagement. *GM Nation* was launched to the public on May 6th, the deadline for submissions was June 18th, a period of just six weeks. This time period was woefully, and unnecessarily, inadequate to ensure the kind of local level engagement, really reaching “ordinary” citizens, that was originally intended. By comparison, government good practice guidelines for public consultations is three months. A public debate on such a scale required at least this amount of time, if not more.

The NCC itself received complaints from local organisations who considered they did not have time to arrange local meetings or who heard about the debate process too late. Others reported failures or delays in getting information via the website address. Even local authorities struggled to put together public meetings in this time period.

NCC research also shows that when seeking to reach disadvantaged groups it is important to take the debate to such communities, and to involve local, trusted groups. Again this takes time and support.

9. The truncated timescale for the *GM Nation* debate also meant that it was not possible for the results of the science and economic reviews to be used as valuable and up-to-date sources of information to inform the public debate. The NCC believes this was a major shortcoming particularly given the controversy that there was over the information that was provided (in particular that provided by the Food Standards Agency).

ROLE OF THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY

10. The NCC would have liked to have seen greater co-ordination and co-operation from the Food Standards Agency with the Public Debate. The NCC, along with Consumers Association and Sustain wrote a joint letter to the FSA on 12 March 2003, expressing serious concern about the FSA’s approach to GM, and the way it positioned itself in the debate.

EVALUATION

11. Evaluation is crucial. It was a failing that this was not built into the budget. The 64,000 dollar question is, will it make a difference and has it impacted on the public’s perceptions of the issue. But this isn’t just about GM, it is also about the way in which government handles matters of risk and uncertainty. It was an important step forwards in acknowledging the importance of giving the public a say on controversial issues, but valuable lessons need to be learned from the process.

12 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by Five Year Freeze (A14)

SUMMARY

1. *GM Nation?* The Public Debate was a bold and innovative attempt to create an opportunity for wide-scale public engagement and debate on a contentious public policy issue. The intention that the outcome would capture the views of the public in order to influence the decision making process is almost unprecedented in current policy making arenas.

¹³ Running risks October 2002.

¹⁴ GM Food: the consumer interest March 2003.

2. However, although there was a good response from the public and in this respect can be deemed a success, there are many outstanding concerns about the conduct of the process which perhaps inhibited an even more successful exercise. It is important that these issues are fully examined in order that lessons can be learnt for similar exercises in the future.

3. Points of concern raised by the Five Year Freeze and which we would like the Committee to examine in more detail are:

- The appointment of the Central Office of Information (COI) as prime contractor for the debate process
- The budget and timing of the debate
- The role played by Defra
- The commitment of the Government to act on the debate outcomes
- How Government will more broadly take account of “lessons learnt” and the implications for public engagement, the rebuilding of public trust etc.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Five Year Freeze welcomes the inquiry by the EFRA committee to look at the conduct of the GM public debate, and in particular the role of Defra in this.

2. The Five Year Freeze is an alliance of over 120 UK organisations calling for a continued moratorium on the growing of GM crops in the UK. One of the alliance’s key demands during the period of a moratorium is a comprehensive public debate and an increase in public engagement with the decision making process concerning GM crops. From the outset the Freeze welcomed the intention of the Government to hold a public debate on GM issues prior to any decision about the commercialisation of crops in the UK.

3. The Director of the Freeze, Clare Devereux, sat on the independent Steering Board set up by Malcolm Grant, chair of the AEBC, representing the interests of NGOs and members of the public in overseeing and designing the debate process.

4. In addition the Freeze played a significant role in disseminating information on the debate process to the wider NGO community and members of the public, via website, newsletter, telephone and regular meetings, and organised a local meeting in South London.

5. The following points are drawn from the experience of the Freeze Campaign Co-ordinator and her interaction with members of the public and NGOs during the debate process, and the views of the Freeze Director from her perspective on the Public Debate Steering Board (PDSB). In the latter case, these views are wholly personal and in no way represent the views of the PDSB as a whole.

The appointment of the Central Office of Information (COI) as prime contractor for the debate:

6. This was controversial for two reasons, firstly because of the acknowledged need to carry out the process at arm’s length from Government, and secondly because of a lack of confidence in the experience and therefore competence of the COI to run the nature of public debate required. These concerns were expressed both by members of the AEBC and the PDSB. However, contrary to the current views of the Secretary of State¹⁵, the PDSB was given no opportunity to explore other possible contractors and was advised that the constraints on time and budget and Government tendering procedures necessitated the appointment of COI.

7. Although COI competently delivered certain elements of the debate, particularly those areas of more conventional “research”, there were others areas, particularly the design of the open deliberative element of the debate, where their lack of experience showed. The guidance required by the PDSB for the creation of a debate which would imaginatively engage a deeply suspicious public, was not forthcoming, and the sub-contractors put forward by COI also appeared to have little experience of deliberative public engagement exercises.

8. An example of this was COI’s presentation of an interactive CD-rom as the keystone of public interaction during the debate, both for individual use and in public meetings. There were serious doubts among PDSB members that a CD-rom would fulfill the deliberative element of the debate objectives, or that it was an accessible tool for use by members of the public, and particularly if it was appropriate for use in a meeting situation. In the end the CD-rom played a very small part in the debate, yet required large amounts of time to develop and a not insubstantive chunk of the toolkit budget.

9. Both in the run up and throughout the period of the “open” debate process it appeared that COI did not have the organisational capacity to deal with the administration of the process, nor the necessary experience of dealing directly with members of the public in this context. Because the debate process relied heavily on the motivation of individuals and local groups to organise meetings in their communities, COI needed to be able to offer support, advice and encouragement—however it seems that their response was

¹⁵ In a recent letter to the Consumers Association, Margaret Beckett (14 July 2003) maintains that the Steering Board chose to appoint COI because of their experience and expertise. In reality the PDSB were presented with no other options.

often lacking. For example, accounts from many quarters—NGOs and members of the public—tell of the struggle to obtain information and materials via the telephone numbers set up by COI. Accounts tell of people who registered their interest in organising a local meeting when attending one of the regional debates, but there was no follow up from COI to this request. Others tell of never receiving requested information. It is conceivable that this lack of administrative support at a basic level prevented many people who would have liked to participate from doing so.

Budget and timing of debate:

10. From the outset the budget and timeline given for the debate by the Secretary of State were impossible to allow for the creation of the type of process required not just by the PDSB, but as necessitated by the complexity of the issue itself. The original budget, based on inadequate figures from COI, had to be revised and consequently the timeline extended halfway through the process—in itself creating problems for the PDSB. Although the final budget was double the original amount, and the COI management costs were absorbed by Defra, the amount was still insufficient.

11. There was no budget for promotion and advertising—a flaw constantly remarked upon by members of the public and another factor which prevented people who may well have liked to engage from doing so.

12. It must also be acknowledged that costs for running local meetings etc were absorbed by the organisers themselves, often small unfunded voluntary organisations or even individuals. Many NGOs also devoted resources to running meetings, publicising the debate and helping members of the public to engage. Often this was because people were failing to obtain information and help from COI.

13. The PDSB recognised from the outset that the innovative nature of the exercise, coupled with the sensitivity and complexity of the issue, would mean that the process demanded adequate planning and development time. However, because of constraints on time, important elements of the process became compromised, in particular the creation of the information materials underpinning the debate. Deadlines for PDSB members (and in this case external stakeholders also engaged in the process) to respond to important pieces of work as they developed, were consistently tight and unrealistic. The end result of this particular process was that none of the participants involved in the creation of the materials was satisfied with the outcome and wanted their names put to the final product. In addition, despite requests from the PDSB, there was no time to test the final components of the toolkit, or the proposed meeting format, in a real situation.

14. The six week period allowed for the open public element of the debate was insufficient to adequately engage members of the public. This became more of an issue because of the lack of publicity etc—many people were only just getting to hear about the debate as it was finishing. Many got to know about it after it was possible for them to engage. This was particularly critical for local authorities which may have wished to get involved but found it impossible in the timeframe given. Government guidelines for public consultation exercises allow at least two to three months.

15. It was always intended that there would be integration and iteration between the Public Debate and the other two strands. However, essential information from the Science Review and the Strategy Unit were not available during the public debate process, once again due to the inadequate timeframe for the Public Debate. In addition the results of the Farm Scale Evaluations (FSEs), an exercise costing vast amounts of public money and deemed by the Government as critical to the future development of GM crops in the UK, were also excluded from the process—it seems almost deliberately. Lack of this information to feed into public engagement with the debate was an unfortunate shortfall.

16. It is our view that the Public Debate should have continued until after the publication of the FSEs, in the autumn. This would also have allowed more time for public engagement with the information produced by the Strategy Unit and Science Review.

The role played by Defra in the debate:

17. From the outset the budget set by Defra and the time allowed was insufficient to implement the kind of innovative debate required. This not only compromised the process, but also failed to demonstrate the Department, and therefore Government's, commitment to the process, and an understanding of the nature and import of the exercise.

18. The failure of Defra to allow inclusion of the FSE results, and the shifting of the date of publication of these throughout the course of the debate, similarly compromised the process and sent out an unhelpful message to the public.

19. Defra officials held regular meetings, often weekly, with COI staff, throughout the course of the debate planning. No member of the PDSB was present at these meetings, which were also unminuted, contrary to the PDSB's commitment to openness and transparency. This perhaps suggests an element of control that potentially undermined and confused the management and oversight role of the PDSB, on which a Defra official (Lucian Hudson, Director of Defra communications) after all also sat. The explanation for these meetings was to co-ordinate media work, however it is clear that budget control also featured. What is not clear is that how much these meetings influenced and curbed the capacity of COI staff to offer advice and options to the PDSB? It also contradicts the Government's stated desire that the debate should be managed 'at arms length from Government'.

20. From the outset there was public scepticism that the Government would act on the outcomes of the debate: this was a major factor in the public's attitude towards the debate process and therefore the level of engagement with it. Deep scepticism based on historic mistrust of the Government's actions on this issue meant that members of the public felt the process was little more than a PR exercise. This was not helped by similar comments from an unidentified Minister towards the start of the process, and as said before, by Defra's allocation of time and budget to the process.

21. The PDSB tried to elicit from the Secretary of State (SoS) assurances that the Government would act on the results of the process, however this was not forthcoming to the degree necessary to create confidence in the public. The SoS has committed to respond to the outcome as she would to a select committee report—but this gives no clear indication that they will act on the results.

22. Many members of the public commented that they felt the Government had already made up its mind to go ahead with GM and so taking part in the debate would be pointless. The fact that despite this lack of confidence many other people did bother to participate in the debate is testament to the strength of feeling and the importance of this issue.

CONCLUSIONS

23. *GM Nation* was successful in capturing the range of public views on this issue and was a worthwhile and innovative exercise. This was despite the flaws in the process outlined above. Had these been avoided through a more adequate budget and timeframe from the outset, the outcome would have been even more satisfactory, particularly from the perspective of the public's satisfaction with the experience.

24. However, this success will be undermined if the Government and Defra fail to take into account the outcomes of the debate. It is hoped that the EFRA committee will continue to monitor this.

25. The opportunity for the PDSB to appoint a contractor or contractors with more knowledge, experience and understanding of implementing wide scale deliberative public engagement exercises would have resulted in a more satisfactory process.

26. Due to lack of time for proper interaction between the three strands, and the exclusion of the Farm Scale Evaluation results, it is essential that the public engagement is renewed once these have been published.

27. There are broader lessons to be learnt from the process of *GM Nation*?—lessons about public engagement and the need and capacity of such exercises to play a role in informing decision making. It is essential that Government takes account of these, and it is hoped that the EFRA committee will also ensure that this takes place.

12 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by the Consumers' Association (A15)

INTRODUCTION

1. Consumers' Association (CA) is an independent, not-for-profit consumer organisation with around 700,000 members. Entirely independent of government and industry, we are funded through the sale of our Which? range of consumer magazines and books. On the EU level we are members of BEUC, the European Consumer Organisation, and we are represented on the international arena by Consumers International. We are also members of the Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue, and co-chair its food working group.

2. CA has campaigned and worked on food issues for many years, and has a long record of researching and communicating food issues to our members and the UK public in general to enable them to make informed choices about the food they consume. The introduction and control of genetically modified (GM) foods has been an important issue for us because of its implications and importance for consumers. We first reported on GM foods in our magazine Which? way to Health in 1989, and have continued to investigate various aspects of the issue such as labelling and safety, the use of GM ingredients, and whether GMOs could aid food allergy sufferers through our Which? and Health Which? magazines¹⁶. Our most recent policy report "GM dilemmas", a copy of which is attached with this submission, was published at the end of last year. This sets out our most recent consumer research, but we have tracked consumer attitudes to the technology since the early 1990s.

¹⁶ For example: "Food Biotechnology: food of the future?", Which?, July 1996; 'Gene Cuisine', Which?, March 1999, and 'GM and food allergies', Health Which?, June 2002.

BACKGROUND

3. We have always advocated that consumers should be consulted about GM foods with their views forming the basis of any future decision by government. Consequently we felt that a public debate on GM foods was long over-due, and welcomed the Government's announcement in June 2002 that a debate would be organised and over-seen by an independent steering board. We emphasised that that it should not be a public relations exercise, and that the results should be reflected in future government policy.

4. Our concern has been that consumer attitudes and unease have largely been neglected. The approach to GM stands in stark contrast to a general emphasis within government, since the publication of the Curry Commission report on farming and food, to reconnect agriculture with the end consumer. Instead, consumer concerns have too easily been dismissed as irrational and ill informed, with even the Prime Minister in the past referring to anti-GM campaigners as being anti-science. The "debate" has become polarised between those who are in favour and those who are against the technology, neglecting the vast majority of consumers who our research shows are concerned about the long-term implications of GM, want to have a proper choice, but have not been listened to.

5. Before considering how the debate has been conducted, it is therefore important to consider what it should have achieved. We saw it as an opportunity for an effective, wide-ranging public debate about the future for GM foods and the conditions and limitations of public acceptance. In order to be meaningful, we felt that the debate needed to address the following:

- consider why the majority of consumers are concerned about GM and what further steps are needed to address these concerns;
- determine whether any GM products could be developed which consumers would find beneficial;
- find out how consumers are likely to react to those products that are already under-development, including modifications involving fish, animals and micro-organisms;
- develop a greater understanding of how food is now produced, where GM is likely to be involved throughout the process and where the limits of consumer acceptability lie;
- determine consumer attitudes towards commercial growing of GM crops now and in the future.

CONDUCT OF GM PUBLIC DEBATE

Contact with Central Office of Information

6. As the UK's largest consumer organisation, CA was keen from the outset for the debate to be meaningful, and to inform and engage our members in the process as well as the public more generally by providing information via *Which?* magazines. We also wanted to ensure that those attending the public meetings would have access to information on CA's research and policy on GM foods to help inform the debate. Consequently, we first contacted the Central Office for Communications (COI) on 21 March to find out the timing of the national GM public debate meetings. On 25 March we were informed by COI that the main launch date would be the second week in May.

7. Information from COI was always vague and non-committal. Contact was made again with COI in April and May. A date was given for the press launch of the public debate, but there was no information on the venue and no details on what interest had been shown by county councils for second tier regional debates or how to ensure CA material could be distributed at the meetings. We became increasingly alarmed that COI did not have the expertise to deal with such a wide-ranging exercise, and that the lack of publicity surrounding the debate would mean that consumers would be excluded from one of the key issues for the future of food and farming in the UK.

8. CA was advised by COI on 28 May to send literature directly to COI for distribution to the second tier meetings, but that the venues and dates were still to be confirmed.

9. Throughout June we contacted COI again for information about the second tier meetings but to no avail. Phone lines were constantly engaged, e-mails were not replied to and the information posted on the GM Nation Public Debate website was minimal. In the end, we liaised directly with members of the GM Public Debate Steering Board for information on the venues and dates for the second tier meetings. It was only by this means that CA was able to contact organisers directly.

10. CA was also contacted directly by members of the public with requests for copies of our policy report and handouts. In talking with them on the telephone we learned that they also shared the concerns felt by CA and other groups about the way the debate was being organised (as highlighted in the following section), but wanted to at least try to organise local events.

11. The lack of advance knowledge about meetings meant that the only information we were able to communicate through our magazines was a very short piece informing members to refer to the GM Public Debate website in the 'Inside Story' section of April's *Which?* magazine.¹⁷ This meant that those without access to the web were automatically excluded from participating.

¹⁷ "Inside Story", *Which?* magazine, April 2003.

12. If we faced these difficulties as a major consumer organisation, we are very concerned that members of the public wishing to participate would have faced similar problems and many may not have even been aware that the debate was taking place. It is interesting to note that this view was felt and recorded by the recent independent GM jury process, as funded by Consumers' Association, the Co-operative Group, Greenpeace and Unilever. The two juries of fifteen people from two areas in the UK concluded, after 8 weeks of deliberations and hearing evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, that the GM Public Debate had been "invisible"¹⁸ The jurors were critical of the lack of publicity surrounding the details of the debate and the fact that most of the information was communicated via the GM Public Debate website despite many people not having access to the internet. In the aims and objectives for the GM Public Debate, it seeks to "create widespread awareness among the UK population of the programme of the debate"¹⁹, yet this is clearly not the experience of the GM Jury.

Role of Defra

13. Contact with other stakeholders that were also closely following the GM public debate process, showed that our concerns and general sense of frustration at how the debate was being managed and coordinated were shared. This led seven leading UK wide organisations; Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, National Trust, RSPB, Sustain, National Federation of Women's Institutes, Unison, along with CA, to write jointly to the Secretary of State on 30 May outlining our mutual concerns. A copy of this letter is attached.

14. These concerns centred on:

- Lack of clarity on how the views of the public will be fed into the decision-making process. The impression given was one of consultation without inclusion.
- Only very few second and third tier meetings had been confirmed.
- The failure to pilot the stimulus materials for the debate and to provide sufficient depth for an informed discussion.
- Insufficient thought given to guidance on how local meetings were to be facilitated to ensure that all participants can be fully involved and that all views expressed could be accurately recorded for the steering committee.

15. In light of the above, all signatories felt that the conclusion of the public debate should be extended until the end of October rather than July 18 to allow more time for the public to take part. This was reinforced by the delay in the release of the farm scale evaluation results which will not now be until later this autumn. Our research on consumer attitudes in relation to GM crops shows that just 32% of those questioned felt that they should be grown commercially in the UK at the moment.²⁰ The main reason given by those who did not think that they should be grown was lack of information. For the debate to conclude without the results of such an important piece of research is quite baffling.

16. Subsequent correspondence with the Secretary of State reiterates Defra's view that it is, and always has been, the independent Steering Board which is responsible for the handling of the public debate not Defra. CA appreciates the need for the debate to have been run independently from government, but to deny ultimate responsibility for an initiative it announced is nonsensical. This hands off approach seems to contradict the fact that Defra officials were kept informed about the organisation of the debate in regular meetings with COI and set the budget and timing for the debate.

Experience of national GM Public Debate meetings

17. CA sent members of staff to the national meetings in Birmingham and Glasgow to see at first hand how the events were structured, what information was given, and how the participants viewed the process.

18. Our experience at the meeting held in Birmingham on the afternoon of 3 June, and in Glasgow on the evening of 11 June, confirmed a number of our concerns as outlined in our joint letter to the Secretary of State on 30 May. There was real anger over the lack of publicity surrounding the meeting with some participants only finding out a very short notice that such a debate was taking place. This meant that those that work, or have other commitments, were prevented from attending from the outset due to insufficient time for making alternative arrangements. There was also a feeling of general scepticism as to what extent, if any, the government would take the views expressed into account. The format of the meeting was also criticised as it did not enable an effective debate to take place. The level of discussion was based on the existing knowledge of those in the individual groups. The series of questions for each session did act as useful prompts and attempted to focus the debate, but more in depth discussions could have taken place if experts had addressed the meeting which was then followed by a question and answer session and a general debate.

¹⁸ The GM Jury published its conclusions on GM crops on 8 September. For further information about the process, and the jurors conclusions, please refer to www.gmjury.org.

¹⁹ 'Aims and Objectives for the GM Public Debate', www.gmpublicdebate.org.uk.

²⁰ Response to figure 16, "Do you think that GM crops should be grown commercially in the UK at the moment?" Annex I [not printed], CA Research Findings, May 2002, GM Dilemmas Policy report, 2002.

19. At the press launch on 3 June, Professor Malcolm Grant is quoted in the press release saying that the GM Public Debate provided the “chance for people from every section of society to have their say”.²¹ Yet it was quite clear from our experience in Birmingham and Glasgow, that the majority of participants were from groups/organisations often with pre determined and steadfast views on GM technology. The message to engage in the GM Public Debate had clearly not reached the UK public as a whole. Our experience from the Birmingham meeting also showed that while a variety of age groups were represented, the audience did not reflect the multi-ethnicity of the UK population.

CONCLUSIONS

20. Hindsight is obviously something that the Government can look to when assessing the GM Public Debate process, but CA, along with many other groups, were highlighting key weaknesses and concerns about the process while there was still adequate time for them to be addressed and rectified. For instance, we expressed our concerns to Lord Whitty, and one of Defra’s leading civil servants on GM policy on 1 July at the meeting between Defra and consumer groups. Unfortunately, Defra failed to take action.

21. While it is encouraging that many people did participate with over 36,000 feedback forms being returned via e-mail and post, and we look forward to reading the Steering Board’s report, we are concerned that an opportunity was lost for a much more wide-ranging and informed debate. This was one of the reasons why we decided to part fund the GM Jury, in order to provide a more deliberative process that could feed into the public debate. The government must also find additional opportunities to enable consumer reactions to the forthcoming results of the Farm Scale Evaluations to be heard.

22. We have concerns that COI did not run the debate effectively. No visible effort was made to contact any large membership based organisations, such as CA, to co-ordinate raising awareness and thereby enhance publicity of the debate. This lack of publicity in general can only make those who were not engaged in the debate even more sceptical about the consultation process and how it will be used by the government when making the final decision on whether or not to grow GM crops commercially in the UK.

23. Finally, we hope that Government will learn from this process and we hope that the public debate can be just the beginning of amore effective dialogue and on-going engagement with the public on this important issue.

September 2003

Memorandum submitted by Munloch GM Vigil (A16)

1. We have long campaigned for a public debate on the issue of GM crops and food. We believe it is essential that the public has as much say as possible in the future of the food it eats, and quite obviously the issues surrounding GM are fundamental to this. We therefore supported the exercise entitled ‘GM Nation?’ and the work preceding it undertaken by the AEBC and the independent Public Debate Steering Board. We would also like to pay our compliments to the way in which the results were processed and presented.

2. We ourselves took part in the debate and organised numerous events across Scotland focussing mainly on the Highlands. We found a good level of public interest and knowledge. People who involved themselves came from all age groups and all sectors of society. At this level ‘GM Nation?’ has to be deemed a success, although there was constant scepticism about whether the government would listen.

3. The debate lasted six weeks and was not heavily publicised or in our eyes adequately funded, however forty thousand people took part making it the largest public exercise of its kind ever carried out. We therefore support the reasons behind the debate, the fact that the debate occurred, and in most ways the way it was carried out. However, we do feel that more funding should have been available, more time given over to the process and better publicity used. These would have all improved the debate.

4. Referring to the points made in the last paragraph (3), we feel that it is important that you are aware that the Foods Standards Agency decided early on in the process to run its own parallel public debate. This cost £110,000, reached very few people and served only to confuse the general public. The problems outlined above, could have been partly addressed if the FSA had simply backed the independent Public Debate Steering Board, provided £110,000 to the ‘GM Nation?’ budget, and helped publicise the whole exercise. We feel it was a gross error of judgement on behalf of the FSA not to do this, and question the motives of its ‘parallel debate’.

5. The materials used in the debate were on the whole acceptable, although there is always room for improvement. However, once again we feel that it is important to draw your attention to the fact that the Food Standards Agency published its own materials. This again confused the overall issue and

²¹ Press Notice released by GM Nation, The Public Debate, “GM Nation—The National Public Debate Starts”, 3 June 2003.

unfortunately, as has been well documented, these materials were not acceptable. It is worth quoting at this stage directly from the FSA Consumer Committee Report to Board (6th May 2003) on the FSA's materials and debate:

Point 5: "It said that the information provided in the booklet and on the website was useful but incomplete and therefore biased as it ignored existing concerns about GM foods."

Point 6: "The Committee questioned the methods adopted and the use of resources. Whilst it agreed qualitative research was needed to explore consumer concerns in more depth, the Committee felt that the commissioned research had not achieved this very effectively." It went on to say that the programme lacked clear objectives.

6. As far as we are aware the FSA's information also contained inaccuracies. An example of this is shown on page 17 of their booklet ('GM Food—Opening Up The Debate'), where it is stated that Australia, China, India and Germany grow GM foods. This is not the case. GM flowers and cotton are grown in Australia, China and India, but they do not allow the growing of GM food crops. Germany does not allow the growing of commercial GM crops at all.

7. It is wholly unacceptable that a public body such as the FSA produces biased and inaccurate information, and we request that appropriate action is taken by the Committee on this point.

8. We also feel that it should be questioned why the FSA decided to carry out its 'parallel debate', when a more than adequate public debate was to be held. Moreover, why when this caused considerable concern, expressed by a wide range of well-respected organisations, did the FSA choose to continue instead of taking the far more effective decision of supporting '*GM Nation?*'

7 October 2003

Memorandum submitted by the Understanding Risk Team and Collaborators (A17)

The Understanding Risk team and collaborators, are currently conducting an independent evaluation of the *GM Nation?* public debate about the possible commercialisation of transgenic crops in Britain, 2003.

BACKGROUND

1. The Understanding Risk programme is a major research initiative based at University of East Anglia and involving researchers from Cardiff University, Brunel University and the Institute of Food Research at Norwich. The programme brings together a team of experienced researchers in the investigation of the nature of risk attitudes, risk governance and public engagement in contemporary Britain¹.

2. Our research work had involved monitoring the work of the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission (AEBC) prior to its proposal to Government for the *GM Nation?* public debate to take place. In September 2002 we were invited to present a detailed evaluation proposal to the public debate's Steering Board, and on the basis of our proposed methodology were invited to act as independent evaluators of the debate.

3. Our evaluation work is funded independently from the debate process, drawing on grants from the Leverhulme Trust and from the Economic and Social Research Council.

4. It is clear that *GM Nation?* was, for the UK, a highly innovative experiment in participatory democracy, regarding the possible commercialisation of a controversial technology. In this respect the debate process itself has been broadly successful in generating unprecedented levels of interest, participation and considered discussion about complex matters of science and policy amongst a relatively large number of the general public. We recognise that members of the Steering Board, who supervised the debate, committed considerable time and personal effort in making this important initiative happen.

5. Throughout the process of evaluation, we were provided with unique behind-the-scenes access by the Steering Board, which has set new standards in terms of openness and transparency. To the Board's credit, this has generated not only an extensive and publicly available "audit trail" for the debate process, but will be of benefit as a research resource for others to use in the future.

6. The process of analysing the voluminous quantity of data that we have collected is still continuing. We aim to publish a major report in the near future, which will:

- Provide a detailed evaluation of the implementation of the debate
- Set the debate results in the context of our research into public views on both GM and its regulation, and on the merits of the debate itself
- Set out a number of recommendations on methodological lessons from the experience of implementing *GM Nation?*

As academic researchers our primary interest is in exploring and developing those lessons for informing future practice and theory. As our research is ongoing we cannot comment upon all of the issues we are investigating. However, we can set out some brief observations on a number of aspects of the debate process in the light of our preliminary findings.

EVALUATION APPROACH

7. There are two main elements when evaluating exercises in deliberative democracy such as *GM Nation?* First how well did the process match up to set criteria and objectives, and second whether identifiable and desired outcomes were achieved².

8. As independent evaluators, the focus of our work has been on the debate process rather than the merits or dangers of the technology. In carrying out this work, we have utilised a range of research methods; details of which are set out in Box 1. When all our work is complete we will have conducted one of the most thorough investigations of citizen engagement ever to have taken place.

9. In order to evaluate the debate process we are working with three distinct sets of criteria.

- First, the aims and objectives as set by the Steering Board itself. Here one needs to ask whether the process could reasonably meet all or some of these objectives, and in the event whether it did indeed do so.
- Second, a set of generic evaluation criteria derived from the academic literature on participatory processes. These focus on whether the debate process was: transparent to both those involved and interested parties; specified well-defined tasks; was run in an independent and unbiased way; was inclusive of all relevant views; had sufficient resources with which to achieve its objectives; and encouraged effective and fair dialogue.
- Third, from analysis of questionnaire responses of participants to the debate we can develop a view of how they judged the success or otherwise of various aspects of the process.

10. At the time we submitted our proposal to carry out the independent evaluation in September 2002, the Steering Board was still in the process of preparing its formal objectives for the debate process. In that sense, work on the implementation of the debate began on the basis of a general understanding of what would be needed. At the time we observed that whilst it was to be expected that the debate would have multiple purposes, this ambiguity had the potential to create a sense of uncertainty about what was going on. We pointed out that the debate could be seen as: an exercise in communication, designed to inform (and possibly persuade) the public; a consultation exercise, designed to chart lay views; an exercise in participation, designed to engage the lay public in a decision-making process; or as an experiment in engagement, designed to assist future practice and policy development. Finally, we noted that ideally all parties to be involved in the debate should be involved in agreeing the criteria that would be used for its evaluation. In this case, we suggested that the Steering Board should give serious consideration to identifying criteria that could reasonably be thought to be widely acceptable.

Box 1: Methods used to gather evaluation data on GM Nation?

Observation of various aspects of the debate planning process

Observation of Foundation Discussion workshops

Observation of a sample of the open events, including all Tier 1 meetings

Observation of ‘Narrow but Deep’ meetings

Issuing questionnaires to participants in all Foundation Discussion workshops and ‘Narrow but Deep’ groups, and to a sample of participants in open meetings

Interviewing key players in the debate organisation, and representatives of engaged stakeholder organisations

Monitoring media coverage of the debate

Commissioning MORI Social Research Institute to carry out for us a major survey of general public opinion in Britain among a representative sample of 1,363 adults on attitudes to GM food and crops, their regulation, and awareness and beliefs about the debate process itself. This survey was conducted during the period July-September 2003.

11. A set of nine objectives were subsequently agreed by the Steering Board. These are set out in Annex B of the report on the debate findings. In addition, a further four indicators of success were identified, addressing: public awareness, the views of participants, the views of “informed commentators”, and the impact of the debate on Government decision-making. We note that these four indicators do not closely address the stated objectives; indeed they sometimes imply other, additional, objectives. We suggest that it is important to consider the setting of these criteria for how the performance of the debate might be judged against the evidence of recent practice in evaluating other deliberative processes. In these terms, most of the Steering Board’s objectives are too imprecisely articulated in order to make them measurable in any rigorous manner. We fully recognise that the debate was an experiment, and it was to be expected that slippage would

occur between any given set of objectives and the emerging practice of the debate process. Nevertheless, the process of setting objectives might have been better informed by the now quite extensive body of research findings in this area³.

FRAMING THE ISSUES

12. The Debate Steering Board was committed to allowing the public to determine how the issues around GM were to be discussed (Debate Objective 1). Towards this end the Board staged a number of discussion groups in 2002 (known as “Foundation Discussion workshops”) to investigate how a representative cross-section of the lay public tries to make sense of these issues. Our preliminary findings suggest that participants in these initial events generally found them very well run, enjoyable, comprehensible, unbiased and allowing people to have their say, although nearly half felt that insufficient time was allocated to discuss all the relevant issues. In methodological terms, these discussions included some interesting and innovative techniques and were very effective in establishing how members of the general public interpret GM in terms of facets of everyday life, like food, health and trust in decision-makers.

13. As previous research has also found, attitudes towards GM are relatively ill-formed, touch upon issues which go beyond the mere “risk” and “benefits” of the technology, and are characterised by considerable ambivalence⁴. We regard this degree of ambivalence as a significant matter in the interpretation of the outcome of the *GM Nation?* debate. Indeed, our 2003 survey indicated that more than half of the general public were not sure whether GM food should be promoted or opposed.

14. The Foundation Discussion workshops also highlighted that there were many factual areas where participants felt they needed to know more: for example concerning scientific and technical matters. The Steering Board thought it necessary to develop stimulus materials to address this shortfall of knowledge. A video, CD-Rom, and information booklet were produced to support the subsequent stages of the debate process. Providing access to some of the evidence needed to inform the debate (Debate Objective 4) set a particularly challenging task for the debate organisers. It was difficult because of the need to reconcile overlapping considerations: a diversity of interpretations of the issues; relatively well-established scientific findings; the various uncertainties associated with the issues raised; and value-based framings, such as those based on ethical concerns. As a recent US National Academy of Sciences Report⁵ on deliberative processes points out, there is no easy way to strike a balance in presenting potentially conflicting frames and information to participants. In the case of *GM Nation?* a range of concerns were expressed to us by stakeholders we interviewed about the way in which the stimulus materials were structured: in terms of an adversarial for/against framing, and in disconnecting ‘facts’ from their sources.

THE FORM OF THE DEBATE

15. The design of the debate process included both “open” and “closed” elements. The open components—including the web-site, the various public meetings and the feedback questionnaire—were designed to maximise as far as was possible access to the process (Debate Objective 5). The “Narrow but Deep” groups were conceived as “controls” on the open processes: purposefully including the perspectives of those who might ordinarily not otherwise self-select to take part in such a debate (Debate Objective 2). We believe this combination represents a particularly innovative aspect of the *GM Nation?* design.

16. The debate design can also be viewed in part as incorporating different research processes (embedded within the deliberations) to ascertain public views (Debate Objective 9). In this respect the Debate itself draws upon both quantitative and qualitative methods in both the open and “Narrow but Deep” elements. It is important to recognise that a range of different standards of acceptable evidence and process apply to these very different research methodologies⁶. In addition, there are two main approaches to sampling; representative and purposive. Representative sampling aims to develop a statistically robust understanding of the distribution of attitudes across the general population. Purposive sampling aims to capture the spectrum of distinctive views and positions (or sometimes a subset of these) within a population. The Steering Board’s final report, with its complex set of findings, needs to be interpreted with these distinctions firmly in mind.

17. Three “Tiers” of open meeting took place. These included six large regional events (Tier One) supported by the Steering Board, about 40 events organised by local authorities (Tier Two) some of which drew support from the Steering Board and COI, and a large number of local meetings (Tier Three). The local meetings were mostly organised by voluntary organisations, including a range of environmental groups. All of these events were encouraged to draw upon stimulus material produced by the Steering Board. We observed a sample of these events, including all six in Tier One. We also issued questionnaires to participants in all events observed, as well as to a number of additional events which we were not able to observe.

18. We have preliminary evidence from respondents in the Tier One open events to suggest they were, in certain respects, atypical when compared with the general public. For example, the self-reported educational level of participants who returned our questionnaires was considerably higher than the UK average (some two thirds of respondents claimed to have a degree, compared to one fifth of the UK population aged between 16-74, according to the 2001 Census). We observed that these events were often dominated by

discussions characteristic of a knowledgeable and experienced engagement in the GM issue. In attitudinal terms, participants in these meetings held less favourable views towards GM food in comparison to baseline data collected in 2002⁷.

19. In organisational terms, the public meetings were regarded by those attending as poorly advertised, with participants tending to find out about them at the last moment. This is not surprising given the relatively small amount spent on direct advertising, and the restricted time available for conducting the main Debate. Although it was the Steering Board's intention to provide stimulus material to participants in advance of the meetings, very often the late notice appears to have militated against this happening. Accordingly, participants were generally unclear about what the events would involve until discussion began.

20. Our respondents generally felt that the events were well facilitated, and that they had had an opportunity to have their say. However they also reported that they had insufficient information and needed more time to complete the process of deliberation (eg just over two thirds agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that "there was not enough time to discuss all the issues"). Participants also felt that the events were enjoyable, but they were not convinced that their views offered in these events would be taken seriously by Government.

21. Many participants in the public meetings expected that they would be able to engage directly with experts on both sides of the GM debate. Whilst the Tier One events did not provide this, by contrast many of the Tier Two local authority events did. The local authority events (according to our small questionnaire sample) were viewed more positively than the six "Tier One" events according to a number of criteria. We asked, for example, whether participants felt that any "hidden agenda" was present in the meetings, and found that this did not characterise the Tier Two events to the same extent as the Tier One events.

22. Turning now to the closed "Narrow but Deep" discussion groups, these were meetings which involved a cross-section of participants, deliberately excluding people with an active interest in the issue. This is appropriate research recruitment practice given the stated objectives of the "Narrow but Deep" groups. These groups met twice, with a gap of two weeks during which participants were invited to explore the GM issue individually, using Steering Board stimulus materials and any other information that they could access. We were provided with observational access to two of these groups, and audio recordings of the remaining eight. On the basis of our observations, we noted that the way in which issues were discussed within these groups was in stark contrast to the kind of discourse typically present at the public meetings. Rather than demonstrating a knowledgeable engagement with the issues, it tended to be more open-ended, wide-ranging and tentative.

23. The Steering Board's final report draws the important conclusion that "attitudes hardened" as the "Narrow but Deep" participants learned more about the issues. We view this as an important empirical claim, which deserves further detailed analysis. We offer the comment here that, as an hypothesis, it may be that the distinctive characteristics of the GM issue mean that styles of everyday reasoning tend to push not-well informed or uncommitted people to adopt a cautionary position towards the potential risks of GM technology as applied to food. This seems to be particularly likely if understood in the context of everyday beliefs about recent food controversies, especially over BSE. We note with interest that the debate report also states that the "Narrow but Deep" participants tended to become more positive about certain potential applications of the technology, especially in health care or in relation to improving agriculture in developing countries.

24. Given the importance of the "Narrow but Deep" findings to the final overall debate conclusions, we suggest that a detailed discursive analysis⁸ of the interactions and talk that took place at these group meetings is necessary, in order to more fully understand the transition in attitudes from uncertainty to caution. In addition, the "engagement period" during which "Narrow but Deep" participants gathered and debated other information and views also deserves further detailed research.

25. In addition to the public meetings the *GM Nation?* debate received over 36,000 completed questionnaires; some 47% of which the final report describes as "implacably opposed" to GM. A legitimate methodological question arises over the extent to which this sample is representative, in terms of attitudes to GM, of a broad cross-section of the public⁹. Other survey evidence indicates that attitudes towards "biotechnology" are complex. If one asks about different applications (medical, crops, food), attitudes differ with the type. In particular people are typically more positive about medical than agricultural applications, and generally more positive when asked about GM "crops" compared to "food". Regarding specific attitudes to GM food, one can identify three broad groups among the general public: first, there is indeed a sizeable proportion of the UK population, which can vary between one third and one half, depending upon the question asked, who see significant risks and very few benefits; second, there is an "ambivalent group" who are concerned but also believe that GM food offers some benefits alongside potential risks; and third, there is a smaller group who are generally positive about GM food¹⁰. Of course, engaged people with clear views on the GM issue had a legitimate contribution to make in the debate. Moreover, the exploration of such views was important, in view of their prominence within the political dynamics of wider debates about GM.

PUBLIC AWARENESS OF THE DEBATE

26. One objective of the Steering Board was to create widespread awareness of the *GM Nation?* debate (Objective 5), although we note that this does not specify a target level of “awareness”. This objective can be evaluated in a number of ways.

27. Both the debate and more general issues related to GM crops and foods achieved reasonable visibility in the media¹¹, but the degree of attention varied considerably across different media outlets. There was considerable coverage in the national broadsheet dailies and in the mid-market Daily Mail, which returned to its “Frankenstein food” campaign theme: coined a considerable time before the debate was even proposed. The two main tabloid dailies carried practically no coverage. The amount of coverage in the local and regional press also varied, being generally greater in areas with agricultural economies or where GM had become a political issue. A Great Britons style television series was proposed at one stage. In the event, the debate failed to attract significant coverage on the main terrestrial television national news bulletins. It attracted more attention on Radio news. A range of radio programmes, from The Moral Maze to The Archers, also provided spaces where the issues could be debated. The internet played an important role as both an additional source of information and a forum for participatory debate, with the BBC website dedicating part of its science message board to GM for most of the debate period. This suggests that future initiatives would benefit from developing “joined up deliberation” by actively looking for ways to integrate broadcast, web based, and face-to-face modes of information exchange and debate.

28. Our 2003 national survey by MORI included a question on levels of awareness of the debate¹². Using a sample size of 1,363 people aged 15 years and older, 14% reported that they had heard about the Debate and knew at least something about it, while a further 13% had heard about it but knew nothing of it. These figures can be interpreted in any number of ways. On the one hand, the bulk of the population (seven in ten) had not heard of the debate at all. On the other hand, this finding does suggest that a sizeable minority of the British adult population had been made aware of its existence. Given the relative lack of advertising, tabloid and television coverage of the debate, this figure might be regarded as representing a modest success, and indeed this performance could usefully be compared to data on awareness of other Government initiatives in comparable areas of science and technology. However, on a question of this kind it should be noted that one can get “false positives”: that is, people claiming to have heard or read about something they have not.

THE CONTEXT SURROUNDING THE DEBATE

29. It is important to recognise that the organisation and form of the Debate were shaped by a number of external constraints. Of prime importance here were practical challenges posed by two inter-related factors: the novelty and scale of the enterprise, and the availability of resources. Without a clear template about how best to organise such a process, implementing the debate itself became a learning exercise resulting, inevitably, in inefficiencies and tensions. In addition, a difficulty in appreciating what would be required in order to deliver the debate effectively led to a serious initial under-estimate by Government of the debate budget. The resulting shortage of funds led to the Steering Board having to seek additional funding from Government: a process which created additional tensions and considerable time pressures. The need to ensure adequate funding at the outset is clearly an important lesson to emerge from the *GM Nation?* exercise as a whole.

30. Distrust in Government is highlighted in the Steering Board’s final report. In commenting briefly on this important issue, we note the ambiguity in Government statements about the objectives for the debate. It was not clear whether the motivation behind sponsoring the process lay in capturing public perceptions and understanding of GM, providing the public with information, or finding ways of persuading the public to accept GM crops and food. The refusal by the Government for the debate to be extended to await the scientific assessment of the Farm-Scale Trials on GM herbicide-resistant crops also prompted much criticism.

31. During the year preceding the debate, a number of ministers had made clear their support for GM, and the Prime Minister had taken the opportunity of a speech to the Royal Society to criticize anti-GM activists. The US government threatened to take action against the EU through the World Trade Organisation on the basis of its allegedly anti-free market position on GM produce. The credibility of the Government’s claims regarding its open-mindedness on the commercialisation of GM crops was further eroded by reminders of its responsibilities of EU membership; for example by the constraint that under the directive EC/2001/18, nation states can only reject GM crops on the basis of scientific evidence of adverse health or environmental impacts, irrespective of public preferences.

32. It is difficult to judge whether these contextual influences made a direct difference to the conduct and outcomes of the *GM Nation?* debate. However we recognise that many of them held the potential to undermine the credibility of the debate process. The evidence provided by our 2003 national survey indicates that 68% of adults thought that it does not matter whether there is a debate on GM or not, as “in the end European and International laws will determine what will happen”.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

33. To reiterate, the *GM Nation?* public debate was, for the UK, an innovative initiative in participatory democracy. Both its strengths and difficulties need to be assessed in the light of the inevitable constraints and practicalities of running a major experiment in public engagement of this nature.

34. Important constraints on the process were the failure to define an adequate level of funding for the debate at the outset, and some ambiguity over the purposes of the exercise.

35. Whilst we concur with the debate's key conclusion, that significant levels of concern about certain aspects of GM exist among the British population, we recognise the need to qualify this finding in the light of the high levels of ambivalence about the technology, and the need to more fully assess, and critique, the debate's methodology.

36. We strongly endorse the view of the debate Steering Board that the evaluation of the debate should be allowed to continue beyond the formal end of the debate process in order to fully measure its outcomes. This work should also investigate the long-term articulation of the GM debate with the science and economic strands (Debate Objective 7), and its influence on Government decision-making both on GM issues specifically and more generally on other areas of science and policy-making, including science and technology.

37. Whilst we were pleased to be in a position to conduct the research needed to evaluate the *GM Nation?* debate, this was in many respects fortuitous and dependent upon a major existing funding initiative by the Leverhulme Trust. For future public debates of this size and importance we would recommend that independent evaluation is explicitly incorporated, and budgeted for, at the commissioning stage.

38. Our evaluation work is ongoing. We would be happy to provide further clarification on any of the above points if required.

Submitted as evidence by Professor Nick Pidgeon, Director of the Understanding Risk Programme, who is also the corresponding author.

Authorship of the document is as follows:

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TECHNICAL NOTES

¹ Details of the Understanding Risk research programme may be found at: www.uea.ac.uk/env/pur. For the purposes of evaluating the GM debate, the Understanding Risk network has received invaluable collaborative support from the ESRC-supported INNOGEN centre at Edinburgh University and by the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. We are also pleased to acknowledge a number of colleagues who have assisted us in collecting data and taking part in helpful discussions: Nick Bailey (Cardiff University), Karen Bickerstaff (UEA), Mick Bloor (Cardiff University), Alan Irwin (Brunel University), Kevin Jones (Brunel University), Irene Lorenzoni (UEA), Carl Macrae (UEA), and Peter Simmons (UEA).

² See Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2001) *Open Channels: Public Dialogue in Science and Technology* POST, London

³ See Rowe, G. and Frewer, L. (2000) 'Public participation methods: a framework for evaluation' *Science, Technology & Human Values*, 25(1), 3-29.

⁴ See eg Grove-White, R., Macnaghten, P., Mayer, S. and Wynne, B. (1997) *Uncertain World: Genetically Modified Organisms, Food and Public Attitudes in Britain*, Centre for the Study of Environmental Change, Lancaster; Petts, J., Horlick-Jones, T. and Murdock, G. (2001) *Social Amplification of Risk: the Media and the Public*, HSE Books, Sudbury; Marris, C., Wynne, B., Simmons, P., Weldon, S. et al (2001) *Public Perceptions of Agricultural Biotechnology in Europe (PABE) Final Report to the European Commission FAIR CT98-3844 (DG12-SSMI)* (see www.pabe.net).

⁵ National Research Council (1996) *Understanding Risk: Informing Decisions in a Democratic Society* National Academy Press, Washington DC.

⁶ See eg, Bryman, A. (1988) *Quantity and Quality in Social Research*. Unwin Hyman, London

⁷ For example, we compared levels of concern, acceptability, importance and the acceptability of current regulations (all in relation to GM food) from a sample of just over 400 questionnaire responses from the Tier One events with a nationally representative sample of 296 from our earlier research. Details of the

earlier 2002 survey can be found in Poortinga, W. & Pidgeon, N.F. Public Perceptions of Risk, Science and Governance. Main Findings of a British Survey on Five Risk Cases (Technical Report). Norwich: Centre for Environmental Risk, January 2003 (copies of this report can be downloaded from the 'Latest News' field of www.uea.ac.uk/env/pur)

⁸ Such discourse analysis would typically go well beyond the thematic analysis applied to such data by market research organisations. See, for example, Sarangi, S and Candlin, C. Eds. (2003) 'Categorisation and explanation of risk: a discourse analytic perspective'. *Health Risk & Society*, 5(2), 115-228.

⁹ It is, of course, a misnomer in risk attitude research to talk of 'the public' as if this is a single undifferentiated entity. In reality civil society comprises a myriad of attitudinal positions and interests.

¹⁰ For poll evidence from Eurobarometer see eg Gaskell, G., Allum, N., Bauer, M.W., Jackson, J., Howard, S., & Lindsey, N. (2003) *Ambivalent GM Nation? Public Attitudes to Biotechnology in the UK, 1991-2002*. Life Sciences in European Society Report: London School of Economics and Political Sciences.

¹¹ Analysis of media coverage of GM issues, and of the debate itself, during the debate period is being conducted by Graham Murdock of Loughborough University.

¹² The survey was conducted for us by the research company MORI (Social Research Institute) directly after the end of the formal Public Debate; ie, between 19 July and 9 September 2003. A nationally representative quota sample of 1,363 people aged 15 years and older was interviewed face-to-face in their own homes in England, Scotland and Wales. All data have been weighted to the known profile of the British population.

10 October 2003

Memorandum submitted by Graham Brookes (A18)

Just a short note to inform you of my experiences. I spoke at the GM debate organised by Cornwall County Council on Sunday 20 July. The format of this debate differed from most others in that four "experts" (speakers) were invited to give presentations followed by questions. I delivered a paper on the market and economic aspects.

The debate attracted about 150 people. Based on the nature of interruptions and questions I estimate that 95% plus of the audience were green/anti GM activists. Almost all questions were from people with anti GM views and largely espoused perceptions and subjective views that repeated views put out by anti GM groups. Much of the views expressed lack evidence to support "claims" and are often based on incorrect or misleading information.

This audience was not representative of the public in Cornwall. It was a narrow, biased element of the total population. This did not, however surprise me given that the vast majority of the public are largely indifferent on the subject (ie, it is not an important issue to most people who accordingly do not really have any strong pro/anti GM views). This can clearly be seen from recent IGD research amongst consumers where 74% of those interviewed were largely "not bothered" about the GMO issue in relation to food consumed.

15 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by the Soil Association (A19)

SUMMARY

1. The Soil Association welcomes the opportunity to comment on the adequacy of arrangements made to support the GM Nation? public debate and in particular the role of Defra.

2. The Soil Association overall was very pleased with the GM public debate and welcome this innovative contribution to government policy decision making. We were very impressed by the level of commitment shown from all those involved: the Public Debate Steering Board (PDSB), the Central Office of Information (COI), and indeed the general public who gave their time to take part in the debate in many different ways.

3. The initial conclusion reached by many that attended the eight regional meetings was that the public debate was just a government PR exercise. However in our experience this view did change over the course of the six weeks. Overall, the feedback we have received from people who attended the locally run meetings has been very encouraging. Although many people had concerns about whether their views would be listened to by the Government they still felt that the public debate was a very valuable exercise that enabled them to come to more informed decisions about the commercial planting of GM crops.

4. We would welcome the idea that well-resourced, independently run public debates should form part of future government policy decisions where complex issues are at stakes, and where public views and concerns are not adequately reflected through official bodies and official channels, and therefore think it is important that we look at how things can be improved in the future.

5. The Soil Association's areas of concern include:

- The lack of clarification from the UK Government about how they are to act on the outcomes of the GM public debate.
- Defra's involvement in the GM debate, in particular problems over timing, duration of the debate and funding.
- The appointment of the Central Office of Information.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Soil Association is the main national certifier and promoter of organic food and farming in the UK. Organic farming has some guiding principles that are based on national processes and taking a holistic and sustainable approach to farming. GMOs are prohibited as they contradict the organic movement's principles for safe and sustainable agriculture. Organic farming now accounts for c. 4.5% of UK farmland and purchases of some organic food are made by about 80% of UK consumers.

2. The Soil Association is against the introduction of GM crop in the UK as it is concerned about the potential negative impacts that they could have on the environment, health, non-GM production and consumer choice.

3. From the outset the Soil Association fully supported the Government's decision to hold a GM public debate and worked very hard to encourage as many people as possible to take part by emailing over 9,000 supporters encouraging them to take part; advertising the event on our website, and in our in-house publications as well as advising enquirers about how they could get involved. Throughout the duration of the debate, the Soil Association took great care not to influence in anyway people's decisions and would like to refute any unfounded and indeed unhelpful claims that in some way we or others with concerns about GM crops "hijacked" the public debate or indeed criticised it.

4. As the Soil Association understood it the initial eight regional meetings were designed to "kick start" the debate so we felt it important to have one representative present at these meetings so that we could be clear on how to encourage people to continue to contribute to this valuable process.

5. We attended some 40 additional meetings as speakers, only when invited and only as part of a panel of experts to give a balanced view. The Soil Association felt very privileged to be invited to these meetings.

The lack of clarification from the UK government about how they are to act on the results of the GM public debate.

6. The general public has continuously expressed scepticism in regards to how the Government would act on the results of the GM public debate. Even though the Government and especially the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been repeatedly ask to clarify this issue, they have not done so in a way that has restored public confidence, nor even clarified the Government's position. Even though many felt that the debate was purely a public relations exercise the fact that as many people participated as they did only highlights the importance in which the general public regard the GM issue.

Defra's involvement in the GM debate, in particular problems over funding, duration and timing.

Budget of the debate

7. The Soil Association believes that the budget allocated by Defra for the debate was inadequate for such an innovative approach to public consultation.

8. Right from the beginning there were petty arguments from Defra over the budget and this did a lot to encourage public scepticism over the Government's intentions. Although the total budget for the debate did increase there was still no budget available for promotion and advertising and as a result there were no adverts placed in local papers or other publications. The COI had to rely on the Internet as their main mode of promotion. As a result the Soil Association feel that the lack of publicity prevented many people from taking part. This was certainly one of the main criticisms expressed to the Soil Association by the people who did take part in the debate and many felt that if it wasn't for the fact that organisations like the Soil Association helped to publicise the event they would not have heard about it. In addition due to the lack of publicity many thought that the debate only comprised of the eight regional meetings.

9. There was also very little left in the budget to help fund the cost of running local meetings with many small organisations having to absorb this cost themselves.

Timing of the debate

10. The Soil Association believes that the timing of the debate was inappropriate. Due to the initial arguments from Defra about the budget, the timing of the debate was only announced a month before it began. This meant there was very little time for people to become informed about the debate, to make the necessary arrangement to attend the eight regional meetings, or to organise meetings of their own. This situation was not help by the fact there was very little publicity.

11. In addition, the results of both the economic and science strands of the debate were not available at the time of the public debate. Although according to Defra these two strands were supposed to feed into the GM public debate, this did not happen.

12. Defra have always put a great emphasis on how valuable the results of the Farm Scale Evaluations (FSEs) will be in helping the Government come to a decision on whether to proceed with the commercial planting of GM crops. Therefore it was only right that the results should have been published to coincide with the debate so they could frame some of the discussions. However in the end this did not happen.

13. The fact that the public was not given sufficient access to the economic or science strands or the FSEs results only made them question the commitment of Defra to an open and fair debate.

14. Due to time constraints there was also no opportunity to run any pilot meetings which would have helped to inform COI of the best approach to take in regards to the organisation of meetings and the usefulness of the “toolkit”.

Duration of the debate

15. The Soil Association believes the six-week period in which the debate was conducted was far too short for many people, local councils and networks to have sufficient time to organise meetings and get the feedback forms returned by the closing date.

16. As a result the Soil Association continues to get a steady flow of requests to put our view across at GM debate style meetings with some already arranged well into next year.

Appointment of the Central Office of Information

17. Although the Central Office of Information did show a high level on commitment to the debate the Soil Association have concerns over whether their appointment was appropriate.

18. Due to the constraints on time and budget the PDSB was not given the opportunity to put the role of prime contractor for the debate out to tender and therefore had to appoint COI as requested by Defra which brings into question Defra’s commitment to keep the debate “at arms length” from the Government.

19. By their own admission the COI had never had to organise anything like a public consultation event and therefore lacked the experience needed to engage the public in deliberate debate. This was very evident in the disorganised way the first few regional meetings were run—which for example gave very little time to actual debate. This left many people feeling that it had been a waste of their time attending. However in COI’s defence, the meetings did improve but nevertheless their appointment to the post of prime contractor is questionable.

Toolkit

20. In regards to the stimulus material the Soil Association welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the questions formulated from initial focus group meetings, that formed the basis of the toolkit. However we were disappointed to learn that a lot of our comments were either omitted altogether or watered down. We were also disappointed to learn that the toolkit was presented to the public as having our full endorsement when in fact due to a wholly inadequate consultation period we were unable to comment on the final draft.

CONCLUSION

21. Overall the Soil Association believes that the GM public debate was successful in meeting it’s objective to engage the public in deliberate debate. This is despite our concerns over: the lack of clarification from the UK Government about how they are to act on the outcomes of the GM public debate; Defra’s involvement in the GM debate, in particular problems over timing, duration of the debate and funding; and the appointment of the Central Office of Information.

22. The Soil Association hopes that the Government will act on our concerns and learn from the GM public debate process so future public consultations are run more effectively and gain more of the public’s confidence and respect.

15 September 2003

Memorandum submitted by Richard Heller (A20)

I was engaged as a professional writer to draft and edit the report of the *GM Nation?* public debate on GM technology and the commercialisation of GM crops in the United Kingdom. As such, I read and analysed all the source material which went to the Steering Board, and attended national, regional and local events which were part of the open debate as well as one of the reconvened discussion groups. I was not involved, even

as an observer, in any decisions about the form and content of the debate. I arrived in the debate with no pre-conceived views of my own about GM issues and no expectations about its likely results. From that experience and perspective, these are my thoughts on the debate.

1. The Steering Board succeeded, perhaps beyond its expectations, in its aim of letting the public frame the issues for debate. I was struck by the way in which all the participants in each element of the debate spontaneously enlarged the range of issues about GM which they wanted to see discussed—even in settings where they were invited to focus on specific themes. At an early stage in my analysis I tried to identify common issues which were raised both in support and in opposition to GM and to number them. I was forced to number 18 separate issues on each side, and a further 6 which I classed as “uncommitted”. The “width” of these issues went beyond those suggested by the stimulus material produced for the debate—it was generated by the public. To me, the most striking issue from the public was the degree of mistrust of key decision-makers in GM, especially government.

2. The Steering Board were right to recognize the probability that setpiece events and meetings might be dominated by the minority of the British population who go to public meetings—people who are regularly engaged in public issues. However, if the debate had done no more than capture their views it would still have been a valuable exercise. These people have always been a very important class in British politics—they are very often opinion leaders and formers within families, neighbourhoods and communities, and increasingly they are more trusted than official sources or the media. If 90% of people who go to meetings or write letters on public issues think in a particular way they will have a strong influence on the attitudes in the general population.

3. Nonetheless, the debate would have been wrong to rely exclusively on the evidence of meetings, events and letters. The Narrow-but-Deep component of reconvened discussion groups provided some valuable evidence of the way in which the general population might approach GM, enough to dispose of the idea that there might be a “silent majority” whose attitudes had been completely missed by the debate. In retrospect, perhaps the evidence of the discussion groups might have been supplemented by some conventional opinion polling based on the closed questions, before and after the debate. That would have presented some information about the attitudes of different social classes, which the feedback forms could not achieve.

4. A recurring theme through the debate was the fear that the government was using it as window-dressing and would ignore its results. The government might have dissipated some of this feeling and raised the profile of the debate if ministers had attended some of the events. I was struck by the lack of involvement by MPs in the debate, although a few passed on letters from constituents. Few MPs, if any, saw the debate as an opportunity to engage people in the Parliamentary process.

5. Regardless of the presence of MPs and ministers, it would have been very helpful to participants in the debate if they had been given clear and factual information about who had the power to make decisions about GM in the United Kingdom (especially in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), about the powers and relationships of national governments, the EU and the WTO, and about the timetable for forthcoming decisions. People might even have been invited to respond to specific policy suggestions and for their views on the negotiating position of the UK government within the EU. There would have been risks in that course. It would almost certainly have produced a bigger response from organized pressure groups and perhaps crowded out responses from other sources and the general public. However, I think people would have had more belief in the debate if they had known exactly how their views might be transmitted into policy.

6. The debate would have benefited greatly from the participation of both primary and secondary schools. Schoolchildren, and school-based events, would have drawn many families into the debate who do not normally go to public meetings. Plans for future public debates of this kind should incorporate the participation of school students from the outset, with kits for both secondary and primary schools, and timed to fit conveniently into the school year in all parts of the United Kingdom. However, the fact that schools found themselves unable to take part in such an important public debate as *GM Nation?* during the summer term may say something about the present testing and examination regime in schools and the lack of flexibility in the school system.

7. After an uncertain start, and some snide reporting in the media, the debate gathered momentum, and the number of spontaneous local meetings increased week by week. (Any future debate should definitely have a basic freepost report-back form for organizers—giving basic information about whether the meeting actually happened, the form of the event, and the approximate numbers attending and the opportunity to give some narrative account.) If the debate had continued for six more weeks, I am convinced that the number of events, and feedback forms returned, would have risen exponentially. I am also convinced that the general public would have become more conscious of the debate and would have started to attend events in greater numbers. The government should also have been prepared to finance a national advertising campaign for the debate.

8. I am in two minds about the success of the deliberative process which was encouraged by the Steering Board. At meetings I found that it drew a mixed response: some people at Tier 1 events (mostly strong anti-GM partisans) would have preferred a setpiece debate, with the opportunity to question speakers, others (mostly less committed) expressed real appreciation for meeting interesting people and having a stimulating exchange. The Narrow-but-Deep discussion groups showed very clearly some potential effects of

engagement and deliberation on public opinion, but the evidence on this from the open debate was far less clear, because so many people attended them whose minds were already made up. That said, I was struck by the difference in the response of letter-writers to GM (basically 13 to 1 against) and the comments of meeting-goers (basically 5 to 1 against). Letter writers did not have to deliberate at all: meeting goers encountered other points of view, not only in the meeting but on the feedback form. That might suggest that deliberative responses to GM are different from “raw” responses. However, that begs a big question of whether a deliberative response is more valuable than a “raw” one. In a democracy, all opinions should have equal weight, and people are as entitled to act on instinct as on information. Certainly it would be unwise of policy-makers to assume that any form of public debate or consultation will necessarily make people consider any subject in more depth—you can lead a horse to information but you cannot make him drink it.

9. That said, I would like to pay a tribute to the Steering Board for their collective detachment and neutrality in evaluating the results of the debate. I was aware from the outset that Steering Board members had contrasting personal views on GM and I was prepared for what Mrs Thatcher used to call “strong discussion” over possible attempts to comment or editorialise on the public’s views. This did not happen. The Steering Board discussed, sometimes strongly, how data should be interpreted but having decided from the data what were the key public attitudes to GM they were scrupulous in avoiding any implied comment on their merits. I believe that it was helpful in this respect for the Steering Board to bring in an outsider to draft the report: I would recommend this for the future. Whatever procedure is followed, in future public debates of this kind I feel it essential that future Steering Boards should show the same detachment.

October 2003
